2005

The Cultural and Political Economies of Hybrid Media Texts

Marwan Kraidy
University of Pennsylvania, kraidy@asc.upenn.edu

Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Kraidy, M. (2005). "The Cultural and Political Economies of Hybrid Media Texts," in *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Temple University Press.

5 The Cultural and Political Economies of Hybrid Media Texts

The visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction.
—Homi Bhabha

The history of broadcasting before the satellite era is one of national systems in which different political outlooks and cultural policies engendered alternate functions for electronic mass communication: broadcasting was a tool of development in much of the non-Western world, a public service in Western Europe, an instrument of direct propaganda under authoritarian regimes, or a commercial enterprise in the United States and elsewhere. National considerations shaped the broadcasting operations inspired by these various media philosophies. Considered an important national asset, broadcasting was harnessed to promote social stability, foster economic development, and consolidate national unity. In addition to national political and socioeconomic factors, the limitations of available technology restricted the expansion of media activities to the confines of the nation-state. National considerations were therefore paramount in determining the agenda, policies, and content of electronic media.

A closer examination, however, suggests that broadcasting's presumed national scope is in effect an ideal type, not a technically accurate description of actual media operations. Since most broadcast signals travel in concentric circles and most countries are not circular in shape, signal spillover has been historically pervasive. Southern Norwegians can watch Swedish television over the air, and denizens of the eastern Mediterranean receive terrestrial signals of varying quality from Egyptian and Greek television stations during hot and humid summer nights. Some countries' public broadcasters, such as Japan's NHK, have committed extraordinary technical and financial assets to achieve universal national coverage of an insular territory that presents enormous physical challenges. It is also evident that many countries have used their national media for transnational influence: in the United States, television has been regarded as a global strategic asset since the emergence of the free flow doctrine during Woodrow Wilson's presidency, and later formulated as policy by Federal Communications Commission head Newton Minow (see Blanchard, 1986; Curtin, 1993). Nasser's Egypt harnessed radio as a redoubtably effective tool for pan-Arab mobilization, compelling the Saudi royal family to develop its own broadcasting operations. Last, cooperation agreements between governments to exchange programming have been a recurring phenomenon, indicating that national media systems are not hermetically sealed entities.

In the last two decades, information technologies have overcome many restraints on terrestrial broadcasting. The advent of geo-stationary satellites, whose orbit is calculated to follow Earth's movements in order to keep the coverage area, or footprint, constant has decreased the technical laboriousness and financial cost of television coverage. Global information networks have mitigated time and space restrictions, albeit selectively and asymmetrically. Faster, less costly, and more efficient information and transportation technologies have made it easier for companies and governments separated by oceans or landmass to cooperate on media ventures. The growing international regime of free trade and decreased government intervention has triggered some of these changes and exacerbated others, as states de facto relinquish the principle of prior consent and cope with a global system based on the free flow precept. These circumstances have inexorably pushed television's transnational and global expansion.

If technology made the transnational expansion of television possible, the neoliberal momentum that peaked in the late 1990s turned television into a largely deterritorialized, global industry. The deregulation of media and telecommunications has entailed the withdrawal of the state as an active manager of national broadcasting, and the concomitant rise in importance of the multinational corporations that now control much of world media activities. These corporations themselves restructured to embrace a post-Fordist modus operandi, as public and national media systems worldwide were thrust into a liberalization frenzy of privatizations, mergers, acquisitions, and vertical and horizontal integration. This transformation became ostensible in the 1990s, as world television screens filled up with internationalized programs, including talk and game shows, reality television, and music videos.

Transnational post-Fordist practices are the undertow of these industry trends. As an economic paradigm, post-Fordism focuses on procedures such outsourcing, subcontracting, multidivisional competition and collaboration, and joint ventures, caused by a decentralized accumulation of capital. British film and television scholar Michael Wayne argues that political economists of the media have ignored or dismissed post-Fordism because it implies that capitalism's affinity to create monopolies has been at least partly set back. Wayne (2003) argues that post-Fordism is characterized by a "discrepancy between the real [economic] relations and their appearance forms" (p. 84), where industry consolidation is masked by the superficial appearance of pluralism and competition. These practices are "transnational," following Danish media scholar Preben Sepstrup (1990), for whom transnationalization is a primarily economic process which drives sociocultural change.

Another post-Fordist postulate is a belief in regional markets as a counterbalance to the power of global market forces (Wayne, 2003). There is indeed a process of regionalization going on in tandem with media globalization. While the giant conglomerates—Time Warner, Bertelsmann, the News Corporation, Sony, and so on—lead globally, companies such as Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico and Rede Globo in Brazil continue to strengthen their positions in and beyond Latin America. In the much discussed pan-Arab satellite television industry, dominant companies are emerging amidst a trend toward specialization and consolidation. The privately owned Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation and the Saudi-owned, London-published, Arabic-language daily *al-Hayat* merged newsgathering operations in 2002, and the rise of al-Jazeera in the post–September 11 era has stimulated competitors such as Al-Arabiya and others. In the meantime, U.S. cable company CNBC launched an Arabic service in June 2003, purporting to bring the wonders of personal finance to the nearly three hundred million Arabs in the region and the few million Arabs in North America and Western Europe. The size of this regional audience, in addition to the wealth of Persian Gulf consumers and the demographic youth of the entire area, will undoubtedly continue to attract global players in the near future.

These developments explain why television programs are increasingly hybrid, embedded with signs and symbols with transregional appeal, and executed in line with the imperative of market expansion. It is important to note that since most emerging regional media spheres are commercial, modeled largely in line with U.S. production, promotion, and financing standards, cultural dissimilarities within geocultural regions often require extra production and marketing expenses, which by necessity embed regional processes in global media operations.

Liberalization and consolidation have also triggered a race to the bottom as media companies strive to reach increasingly larger audiences without incurring proportionally higher costs. One result has been that television programs are increasingly designed to appeal to worldwide audiences, a strategy with considerable advantages. Logistically simpler than coproduction, creatively less restrictive than format adaptation, and economically less onerous than both coproduction and format adaptation, program internationalization now pervades television news and entertainment alike, categories that are themselves increasingly blurred. The Cable News Network (CNN) and Music Television (MTV) are textbook cases, the former in news and the latter in entertainment. CNN launched *CNN World Report* in 1987, a unique program that showcased reports on various countries sent in English by local reporters working for local stations. Two presenters in CNN studios introduced the reports, but other than that CNN had no direct production involvement in the content of the program. In the early twenty-first century, executives at CNN International are talking about "de-Americanizing content," according to Chris Cramer, head of CNN International ("The One," 2003, p. 73). Between 1996 and 2001, the percentage of American content on CNN International was reduced from 70 percent to 8 percent, although how to clearly define what is American is arduous, and the most direct definition is content that deals with U.S. issues. Music Television's localization—which in reality means internationalization—strategy relies on segmenting international audiences according to linguistic, cultural parameters in their national or regional contexts. This is conducted through featuring the work of some local artists, hiring local VJs (video jockeys) to host programs, and overall sensitivity to the cultural specificities of the country or region in which MTV operates. Between 2001 and 2003, MTV launched fourteen new channels, including MTV Romania and MTV Indonesia. The total number of worldwide MTV stations stood at twenty-eight in 2003. An MTV executive has even claimed that "[w]e don't even call it an adaptation of American content: it's local content creation. The American thing is irrelevant" ("The One," 2003, p. 73). Becoming more local is, for CNN and MTV, the surest way to become more international.

Another result of global media liberalization is the proliferation of lower-cost, high-impact genres such as the variety show, the talk show—in both its low-brow and high-brow variations—and more importantly, the now ubiquitous reality genre and its many subtypes. These genres have in common an absence or minimal presence of highly paid talent, low-cost studio or outdoor production, and a tendency toward the raw, bizarre, and sensational. In this environment program-format adaptations and coproductions are increasingly common; the former entail the adaptation to local parameters of tastes and style of a popular program format gleaned from a different culture, whereas the latter involve a partnership between several companies based in multiple countries.

Multinational Partnerships and Cultural Hybridity: The Growth of Coproductions

Coproductions give companies several advantages. Canadian media economists McFadyen, Hoskins, and Finn (1998) include as incentives for entering into coproduction agreements "pooling financial resources," "access to foreign government incentives and subsidies," "access to partner's market," "access to third-country market," "access to particular project initiated by partner," "cultural goals," "desired foreign locations," "cheaper inputs in partner's country," and learning new marketing, production, and management strategies from the partner. These benefits outweigh drawbacks such as "coordination costs," "loss of control over cultural specificity," and "opportunistic behaviour by the foreign partner."

Joining forces allows companies to share equipment, technical staff and know-how, and shooting locations. These benefits, in turn, expand potential sources of funding, including government subsidies and tax breaks, and also spread the risk, so that different entities share the burden of a potential commercial failure. Reducing risk is also related to the bigger markets reached by companies that enter into coproduction arrangements: if a television program or movie fails in a national or regional market somewhere, commercial success in a different market will make up for the losses. These considerable financial, technical, and market incentives have triggered a significant worldwide increase in coproductions. Between 1950 and 1994, there were at least sixty-six bilateral coproduction treaties (P. W. Taylor, 1995), and more than two thousand coproductions took place between 1978 and 1995 (Television Business International, cited in Miller et al., 2001, p. 85). Television documentaries and dramas accounted for the majority of coproductions, and film ventures for the remaining 21 percent (ibid.).

There is a distinction between "equity coproductions" and "treaty coproductions" (Miller et al., 2001, p. 84). Equity coproductions constitute a strategic and temporary partnership between two or more companies, driven by the search for maximal profits and usually not eligible for treaty status. As purely commercial joint ventures, equity coproductions do not directly involve issues of cultural policy and national identity. Many equity coproductions have included European and Japanese companies contributing to the financing of Hollywood movies. In contrast, treaty coproductions are formal partnerships concluded under the auspices of national governments. This type of coproduction customarily involves artists, technicians, financiers, and the more-or-less active participation of government officials from two or more countries. As a consequence, treaty coproductions are formal affairs that fall in the realm of international relations and involve issues of national identity and cultural policy. Most treaty coproductions come about in the European Union. According to *Screen Digest*, in 1998, out of a total of a 183 movies produced in France, Europe's largest film producer, 81, or 44 percent, were coproductions. The figures were lower for Italy, Germany, and Britain: 14 percent, or 13 out of 92 Italian films; 22 percent, or 11 out of 50 German films; and 28 percent, or 24 out of 87 British movies, were coproduced. Interestingly, that year's figure was significantly lower for the United States, where only 15, or 9 films out of a total of 661, were coproductions (cited in Miller et al., 2001), in contrast to the 1978–1995 period when 14 percent of U.S. television shows were coproduced. This figure during the same time period is 16 percent for France and the United Kingdom, 10 percent for Germany, and 7 percent for Canada (Brown, 1995, cited in ibid., p. 86). While the benefits of coproductions to companies are by now clear, why are governments taking such an interest?

Striving to capitalize on the globalization of media productions, national and regional governments have aggressively pursued and fostered coproductions in order to boost exports and broaden financial investment in television and film productions. The United Kingdom is a case in point. In the 1990s the then ruling Conservatives decided that the cultural industries had to take advantage of "tremendous export opportunities in a rapidly expanding international market" (Barnett and Curry, 1994, p. 221, cited in Freedman, 2001, p. 3). One of the major obstacles to British and other television-export strategy is the documented prime-time domination of local productions in most domestic markets worldwide. In the United Kingdom itself, for example, *Coronation Street* remains the most popular television program. Despite this recognition, British government support of television exports continued with the rise to power of New Labour. By the late 1990s, Tony Blair's Third Way politics explicitly incorporated free trade in global media products (Blair, 1998). Greg Dyke, who was the chief executive officer of private media conglomerate Pearson before becoming head of the

British Broadcasting Corporation, enthusiastically advocated a British strategy for competing in the global television industry. Dyke had made Pearson a world leader in buying, adapting, and selling program formats. "The trick is," he said, "can you globalize and make it local?" (Baker, 1997, cited in Freedman, 2001, p. 4).

In addition to audience preferences for local programs, the entanglement of national and global considerations is another obstacle to television exportation. This snag had been a source of controversy since the 1994 publication of a white paper on the BBC, *Serving the Nation, Competing Worldwide*, which advocated a focus on selling BBC programs worldwide. In an interview with British media researcher Des Freedman in 1997, Harry Reeves, then head of general broadcasting policy, declared international television commerce to be "very high on the list of policy objectives" and not to pose a fundamental contradiction of the BBC's national public service mandate (Freedman, 2001). In this context, the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) commissioned a report to explore areas of improvement in British television exports. The report, *Building a Global Audience: British Television in Overseas Markets* (Graham, 1999), found that the United Kingdom suffered from a substantive deficit in television trade, and that British dramatic productions were too slow, dark, or serious, which hindered their global competitiveness, while British comedy was internationally successful. The report recommended increased liberalization of the domestic British market.

The British example demonstrates the changing relationship between the state and media institutions, in which the mass media are increasingly treated in economic—contra social, cultural, or educational—terms, frequently the media's own economic terms. From regulator and arbiter, the state has become promoter and cheerleader. The role of government institutions increasingly resembles that of the impresario: they scout opportunities, expedite deals, and reap a portion of the proceeds. Using a mix of financial incentives and cultural appeals, they facilitate access to new markets and coordinate pecuniary transnational partnerships. Even in program-format adaptations, as the next section will demonstrate, the state plays a role.

From *Teletubbies* to *Tele Chobis*: The Unbearable Lightness of Television Programs

The widespread popularity of reality television in the late 1990s accelerated a transnational process of program-format adaptation that goes back to the pretelevision radio era. Australian media researcher

Albert Moran (1998) has documented that adaptation as historically pervasive, and current trends indicate that it is poised to increase as the television industry continues to globalize. Like coproduction, format adaptation helps companies reduce risk and uncertainty, in this case by working with a format with demonstrated success. However, formats might not be popular across cultural boundaries. According to Moran: "a television format is that set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced" (1998, p. 13), which means that unlike coproductions, where a program's intellectual property is jointly owned by the partners, the legal ramifications of format adaptation are tricky, and involve the three legal instruments of copyright, breach of confidence, and passing off (Mummery, 1966, cited in ibid., p. 15).

L'affaire Tele Chobis demonstrates the problems that can arise in program-format adaptation and the ill-defined space between adaptation and plagiarism. In the fall of 1999, the leading Mexican network, Televisa, began airing the British and globally popular *Teletubbies*. During the previous summer, marketing executives from Itsy Bitsy Entertainment, the exclusive North American distributors of *Teletubbies*, had been prowling Latin American countries promoting their flagship program. Initially, TV Azteca, Mexico's second-rated television network, was interested and entered into contract negotiations to purchase *Teletubbies*. TV Azteca executives changed their minds when Itsy Bitsy insisted that *Teletubbies* must be broadcast without commercials. While advertising before and after the airing of *Teletubbies* was acceptable, the condition that no advertisements appear during *Teletubbies* broadcasts was nonnegotiable and thus a contract breaker. Televisa, on the other hand, agreed to broadcast *Teletubbies* commercial free and as a result purchased the program from Itsy Bitsy. The reaction of TV Azteca executives was swift and surprising: they created a copycat program, which they called *Tele Chobis*. An exploration of the design, promotion, and distribution of *Teletubbies*, followed by an examination of the structural forces and cultural specificities that have shaped *Tele Chobis*, provides a rare vista of the active links that exist between media systems and textuality, and helps us understand the political economy of hybridity.

Anne Wood, a former schoolteacher and founder of Ragdoll Productions Ltd. of Buckinghamshire, U.K., created the original *Teletubbies* with her partner, Andy Davenport, a speech therapist. Since its launch by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1997, this program has been a watershed event in children's television akin to globally successful classics such as *Sesame Street*. Wildly popular and reaching dozens of countries, it has triggered references to the four "tubbies"—Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa Laa, and Po—as the Fab Four, a clear intertextual nod to Beatlemania. It is also routinely controversial, especially in the United States, where a slightly modified version is broadcast by PBS, attracting detractors and supporters from the medical community, religious leadership, and the gay press alike.[1] A typical episode features the four Teletubbies, chubby humanoids dressed in gaudy colors who live in an imaginary space of green nature and friendly animals. They sing, dance, and communicate in a verbal code replete with infantile giggles and playful body movements. The same everyday life and household objects appear with regularity during each episode, and simple stories are repeated several times. The Teletubbies also have screens in their bellies, used to show footage of real children.

An aggressive and wide-ranging marketing campaign centered on successful synergistic deals propelled *Teletubbies* to household-name status. In December 1998, QVC Inc., the world's leading "electronic retailer," broadcast a special Teletubbies program, promoting the newly released home videos "Here Come the Teletubbies" and "Dance with the Teletubbies"; a music CD, "*Teletubbies* the Album"; *Teletubbies* beanbag characters; and myriad gadgets and accessories ("Teletubby Mania," 1998, December 28). Less than a week later, Ragdoll and Itsy Bitsy announced a deal with Microsoft to create ActiMate Interactive Teletubbies ("Tinky Winky," 1999, January 6). Two months later, FAO Schwarz New York hosted an "International Teletubbies Celebration" to launch the ActiMate Interactive Teletubbies ("International Teletubbies," 1999). In the same year, Burger King's *Teletubbies* promotional campaign was so successful that the fast-food chain found its fifty million finger-puppet Teletubbies depleted within less than a month (Morgan, 1999).

These synergistic retailing agreements have made the juvenile quartet ubiquitous in Western popular culture and highly popular worldwide, triggering a wave of imitation. The Mexican *Tele Chobis* is not the only *Teletubbies* copycat. In March 1999, Ragdoll Productions Ltd. and New York–based Itsy Bitsy Entertainment Company filed a lawsuit in U.S. federal court in Manhattan against Wal-Mart Stores Inc. alleging unauthorized copying. Wal-Mart had been selling Bubbly Chubbies, Teletubbies look-alikes that shared shelf space with the original Teletubbies ("Teletubbies declare," 1999). Wal-Mart argued that the supplier of Bubbly Chubbies had produced a legal opinion by the law firm Buchanan Ingersoll stating that the Bubbly Chubbies "did not infringe upon any trademarks or copyrights" ("Walmart had," 1999). Less than two months after the lawsuit was filed, Wal-Mart agreed to remove from its shelves and destroy the remaining stock of Bubbly Chubbies, ending the legal feud between Wal-Mart and Itsy Bitsy, who continued legal action against the unidentified manufacturer of the Bubbly Chubbies ("Wal-Mart to destroy," 1999).

Publicity for *Teletubbies* also came via the U.S. culture wars. The February 1999 issue of *National Liberty Journal*, edited and published by the Reverend Jerry Falwell, former leader of the Moral Majority, carried the headline "Parents Alert: Tinky Winky Comes Out of the Closet" with an article alleging that purple Tinky Winky was a gay character, and that the "subtle depictions" of gay identity were intentional. Falwell reportedly said: "As a Christian I feel that role modeling the gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of children" (Reed, 1999). This triggered a firestorm of controversy in the U.S. and international media. Across the Atlantic, the BBC sniffed: "the Teletubbies have made the Rev. Falwell, chancellor of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, hot under the collar" ("Gay Tinky," 1999). The BBC's official response that "Tinky Winky is simply a sweet, technological baby with a magic bag" (ibid.) seemed to be shared by the press and the public alike. The *Washington Post* asked: "Can Mr. Falwell believe that just because Tinky Winky is purple, has a triangle antenna on top of his head and carries a handbag that he's a gay role model for our toddlers? Even Laa Laa, Dipsy and Po must be shaking their heads in disbelief" ("Subliminal Messages?" 1999).

Inevitably, the debate became highly politicized. A February 1999 resolution was introduced at the city council in Berkeley, California, backing the Teletubbies and condemning Falwell's views, leading Ken Viselman, head of Itsy Bitsy Entertainment, to call for leaving politics out of *Teletubbies*. About Tinky Winky, Viselman said: "He's not gay. He's not straight. He's just a character in a children's series. I think that we should just let the Teletubbies go and play in Teletubbyland and not try to define them" ("Calif. Resolution," 1999).[2] A few days later, the March edition of *National Liberty Journal* carried a front-page Falwell article in which he wrote: "Until the recent media explosion accused me of 'outing' Tinky Winky as being gay, I had never heard of this sweet looking character. I certainly have never criticized Tinky Winky in any way" ("Falwell Denies," 1999). However, the conservative reverend stood by his warning about the conjectural dangers of homosexuality (ibid.). Needless to say, this controversy added to the already strong visibility of the program.

The Mexican adaptation, *Tele Chobis*, retained *Teletubbies'* basic structure, but offered variations in terms of the leading characters, the story lines, and the overall content. Instead of Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa Laa, and Po, Azteca's copycat featured Nita, Toso, Ton, and Tis. Nita wears green, Toso yellow, Ton blue, and Tis dark pink. Both programs are set in a garden populated with rabbits and replete with toys: the Teletubbies play on a seemingly placeless green hill and live in a bunker under that hill; the Tele Chobis live in a house inside the trunk of a big talking tree that overshadows what looks like a pastoral garden. Like *Teletubbies*, *Tele Chobis* unfolds in the two spaces of nature and technology (see the analysis of *Teletubbies* in Lemish and Tidhar, 2001), the former represented by the garden, the latter by the nine screens on the wall of the *Tele Chobis* house in the tree. *Teletubbies* and *Tele Chobis* episodes both focus on a limited number of issues and repeat information about them, in addition to circuitous story lines that revisit issues several times during each episode. Also, each installment of both programs includes several familiar objects. For *Teletubbies* these comprise a tittering baby face framed in a sun, a hat, a purse, and a vacuum cleaner. In *Tele Chobis* these encompass the commentators Champi and Ñon (*champiñon* is Spanish for "mushroom"), a sheriff's badge, animals, and the big talking tree. In all these aspects, the similarities between the original and the copycat are straightforward.

Differences between *Teletubbies* and *Tele Chobis* reflect the intended audience. Whereas *Teletubbies* was conceived as a culturally "neutral" text that could be sold across national and cultural borders, *Tele Chobis* was intended for Mexican children. This is manifest in the different placements of real-life children in the two programs. In the British original, sequences of older children appear on screens in the tubbies' abdominal areas, monitors intentionally designed as instruments of localization: different buyers of the program have the ability to insert culturally relevant material in those screens. In contrast, the Mexican copycat incorporates real children in the narrative through parallel editing and montage sequences. One final difference: whereas *Teletubbies* is touted as the only program to have targeted children under the age of two, *Tele Chobis* cast a wider net to include what is probably a two-to-eight age bracket. Unlike the nonlinguistic blabbering of Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa Laa, and Po, the Tele Chobis Nita, Toso, Ton, and Tis speak a Mexican-accented Spanish. More importantly, because *Teletubbies* was designed as a "universal" text while *Tele Chobis* was created for the domestic Mexican market from the original and now global format,the latter exhibits a cultural hybridity that is marked, the ensuing analysis will demonstrate, by incongruent scenes and costumes, a diversity of objects from a variety of geographical and cultural locations, and a hodgepodge of commercials and public service announcements for Mexican and American products and programs.

An episode of *Tele Chobis* ran an hour with six commercial breaks, three to four minutes (six to eight commercials) each. Typical advertisers—oddly, not all targeting children—included clothing companies, technical colleges, computer support, snacks and candy, and Mexican federal government public service announcements on public health, sexual hygiene, the environment, and social development. For example, episode 4, which aired in March 1999, began with the Tele Chobis singing under the talking tree where they live. Then a rapid montage sequence featured the Tele Chobis dancing and walking on waterside alleys, alternating with shots of farm animals. After that, we see Nita, the Tele Chobi dressed in green, waking up in a room inside the tree trunk filled with television monitors, tall glass panels with water bubbles, a yellow cupboard, and a big clock above the door. Nita feels lonely and seeks consolation by talking to the tree. The other three Tele Chobis are then seen having a picnic next to the water, with trees painted white about two feet high. The episode's theme is loneliness, explored in the context of children who are left at home to their own devices. We see testimonies from several real children between the ages of six and three saying what they like to do when they are home alone, one of them a brown-skinned, black-haired boy wearing an NBA T-shirt. Then the Tele Chobis are seen, interspersed with shots of children in gardens and at school, dancing to a song whose lyrics focus on loneliness. Cedar and cypress trees can be glimpsed in some shots, with green mountains reminiscent of *Teletubbies*, but most shots are taken in front of the large tree trunk that serves as the Tele Chobis' abode.

The first break carried advertisements for *Aventuras de Doug* (a Disney cartoon), Hecali clothing, Expertus computer services; public service announcement for the Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (National Human Rights Commission) and La Clave (the telecommunications ministry, promoting new phone services); and finally a promotional preview for the broadcast of an ice-hockey game between Ottawa and Dallas. After the break we are back to the picnic, and a phone number appears on the screen with an invitation for children to call and share their favorite surprise. Nita, Toso, Ton, and Tis initiate a waterside dance, dressed in snow hats, scarves, and earmuffs. After a brief intervention by Champi and Ñon, two tree-perched boorish animal commentators, the scene changes and Ton, the Tele Chobi in blue, comes in dressed as a U.S. sheriff, dancing to a tune of imitation U.S. country-western music. The others have red scarves around their necks, cowboy style, one green, the second dark pink, and the third yellow. The background is interspersed with typically Mexican maguey cacti, and the music shifts from Western line dance to Norteño (Northern Mexican) music, and then settles into a hybrid mix of the two genres. After the dance, the Tele Chobis hug Nita, who tells Ton, Toso, and Tis how lonely he felt waking up without them. After the second commercial break ("Presumed Guilty," a soap opera; Marinela chocolate cakes; environmental and public health PSAs; Elektra electronic appliances store; and a promotional preview for *Los Simpsons*), one's imagination and doing what one likes are introduced by voice-over as palliatives to loneliness, with a children's soccer game providing visuals for a ragtime tune. After the third commercial break, colored balloons cross the screen upward and the Mexican copycat quartet is seen dancing to Norteñas, whose rhythm is enhanced by fluid camera movements and parallel editing of children dancing to the same tune in a school yard.

The hybridity of *Tele Chobis* is manifest on two fronts. First, the set includes many markers of Mexicanness. Unlike their English counterparts, whose abdominal screens project footage of children, in *Tele Chobis* scenes of real children are intrinsically part of the program's structure, which belies *Tele Chobis'* intended national audience. Indeed, markers of Mexicanness are many, the first of which is the use of spoken Mexican Spanish. Second, maguey cacti, whose pulp is the raw material of the quintessentially Mexican pulque or tequila, are prominently featured in the program, often in close-ups. Other markers include the monarch butterflies, identified with the Mexican state of Michoacan, a major resting area for these Monarcas on their seasonal peregrinations, and increasingly associated with Mexico as a country. There is also the Guacamaya parrot, found in Mexico's tropical areas. Also, Norteño music tunes underscore the Mexican identity of *Tele Chobis*. Finally, many of the outdoor scenes are shot in ex-haciendas, whose late colonial architecture is also closely associated with Mexico. These visual and aural markers—most of them naturalistic and therefore highly localized—stamp *Tele Chobis* with Mexicanness, a hybrid identity grafted onto an original and innovative text, product of the imagination of a British schoolteacher and promoted by a U.S. entertainment company.

There is, however, a second, more complex embodiment of hybridity. *Tele Chobis'* odd mixture of icons, signs, and objects underscores a radical intertextuality where foreign cultural elements collide and fuse. NBA T-shirts, country-western music, sheriffs' badges, and promotions for U.S. shows like *The Simpsons* and myriad Disney productions, point to the preponderance of U.S. popular culture as a provider of content and as a source of dialogical connections. Earmuffs, scarves, and wool balaclavas worn by the Tele Chobis while promenading or dancing outdoors are also emblematic of a hibernal northern ethos incongruent with *Tele Chobis'* Mexicanness. The iconic mushrooms, balloons, Jeeps, and other items that swirl vertically across the screen throughout each episode increase the atmosphere of radical cultural diversity characteristic of the show. The carnivalesque nature of the program comes in full focus in a scene where Nita, Toso, Ton, and Tis are dressed like medieval entertainers, in a mise-en-scène that transforms their exaggerated baby faces, protuberant cheeks, and dark-lined eyes into monstrous features.

In keeping in mind the show's intended infantile and juvenile audience, these menacing facial traits are neutralized, as the Tele Chobis use them to scare away insects, especially a bee that is harassing a frightened Toso. At that moment, the voice-over of the tree conveniently intervenes to remind children that insects are good for us and should not be harmed, and a song "*Abejas, Hormigas*" (Bees, Ants), praises the lives of insects and the benefits of insects to humans and the environment. When a butterfly finally lands on Ton's arm, the four humanoids are fascinated and fully converted to friendliness toward insects.

This positive pedagogical turn notwithstanding, the visual monstrosity of that scene, centered on the characters' physical appearance, is symptomatic of a radical cultural openness, a carnival aesthetic. As film scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) write, following Bakhtin: "carnival embraces an anticlassical aesthetic that rejects formal harmony and unity in favor of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic, the miscegenated . . . . In the carnival aesthetic, everything is pregnant with its opposite, within an alternative logic of permanent contradiction and non-exclusive opposites that transgresses the monologic true-or-false thinking typical of a certain kind of positivist rationalism" (p. 302). Indeed, *Tele Chobis* carries the cross-fertilized debris of variegated cultural influences and aesthetic styles. It may have been a copy of *Teletubbies* from the perspective of modern copyright—an issue I will address shortly—which is why the program was pulled off the air within a few weeks of its first broadcast. To the cultural critic, however, more than a violation of intellectual property laws, it is a rich text replete with signs and symbols whose intertextual tie-ins subvert the laws of genre as the text itself undermines the copyright regime. *Tele Chobis* is therefore an ideal hybrid text, reminiscent of mythological fables, where aesthetic conventions and artistic practices are subverted, where the monstrous cohabitates with the sublime and the universal with the particular, and where the hybridization of cultural forms is not merely an aesthetic attribute of the text, but actually constitutes its texture and pervades its identity.

Tele Chobis can thus be interpreted as a modern version of the fable of ancient mythology. According to Serge Gruzinski, a French anthropological historian of Mexico and author of the ingenious *La pensée métisse* (Gruzinki, 1999), the fable as a genre exhibits "an indifference to geographical and historical markers" (p. 145, my translation) and a propinquity to embrace disorder and mixtures. Therefore, Gruzinski concludes, the fable is an ideal framework for hybrid cultural forms. As a radically open semiotic system, the fable is a creative space where, Gruzinski wrote in reference to colonial-era Indian paintings in Puebla and Ixmiquilpan, "a centauress can flirt with a Mexican monkey under the eyes of a Spanish cleric" (p. 149).[3] Reeling from Spanish colonial control, native Mexican artists during the Conquista used the fable and grotesque art to effectively subvert colonial aesthetic conventions, a subversion made possible by the fable's intrinsic tendency toward the foreign, the fabulous, and the fantastic. In sharp contrast with sacred art, where colonial church surveillance would be intense and the borders of the iconographic canon heavily policed, the grotesque arts gave free reign to the imaginative and seditious expressiveness of local artists. Thus Gruzinski demonstrates that the Indian painters of Puebla and Ixmiquilpan appropriated a form, the grotesques, originally conceived in Renaissance Italy, in addition to a native cultural content to create hybrid images that playfully undermined colonial aesthetics. Gruzinski sees the same phenomenon at work in contemporary creations such as Peter Greenaway's *Prospero*'s *Books*, where hybridization "opens the way for all kinds of appropriations: it pokes fun at ordinary logics, scrambles the laws of plausibility, of space and time, ignores the laws of gravity, foils representational conventions" (p. 156).

Arguing for a linear historical correspondence between native Mexican painters of the colonial era, aesthetic innovations in Renaissance Italy, Peter Greenaway's dramatic creations, and *Tele Chobis* would be imprudent. However, as products of a world increasingly characterized by cross-cultural interpenetration, texts from these different periods offer more than simple intertextual traces. Like the fable, children's television offers an extremely flexible creative environment, where the form itself, whether through animated or acted imaginary characters, is a creation, and the content is allowed license (in the use of language, colors, forms, sound, etc.) that would not be tolerated in most other television and film genres (see Kraidy, 1998b, for a treatment of this issue in children's animated film). With its placeless green fields, outlandish characters, invented nonlanguage, and heteroclite content, the original *Teletubbies* embodies this conspicuous openness perhaps more than does any other program for children. As a hybrid offshoot of the already hybrid *Teletubbies*, *Tele Chobis* thrusts this radical dialogism into new territory, where intertexts jostle in a seemingly random dance of push-and-pull of discordant icons, discrepant musics, dissonant fashions, and incongruous characters.

Unlike hybrid colonial painting, however, which as Gruzinski (1999) evinced, survived and prospered under colonial strictures, the textual excess incarnated in *Tele Chobis* was curbed by the prevailing system of reference and power. Today's global copyright regime, it turns out, is more successful than the colonial Spanish church in bringing overflowing creative energy back into the fold of the permissible. Whereas Indian Mexican painters indulged in aesthetic subversion, the threat of legal action by the U.S. Itsy Bitsy Entertainment and British Ragdoll Productions brought the Mexican *Tele Chobis* to a quick end: as mentioned earlier, the program was taken off the air a few weeks after it was first broadcast. This was facilitated by an environment of stricter intellectual property–law enforcement by Mexican authorities in the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and a transitional period for the Mexican cultural and media sectors.

The *Tele Chobis* affair occurred at a time of fundamental changes in the Mexican audiovisual industries, triggered by their increased integration in global media markets (Lomelí, 2003) and increasing competition between Televisa, the leading media company, and TV Azteca, the creator of *Tele Chobis* and second in Mexican audience ratings. The background of these changes was the liberal economic drive initiated during the Miguel de la Madrid presidency (1982–1988) and culminating in NAFTA. This trend continued after NAFTA, so that by 2000, Mexico had entered twenty-seven free trade agreements ("México en el Mundo," 2000, cited in Sánchez-Ruiz, 2001). In the 1990s, both Televisa and TV Azteca embarked on ambitious global expansion plans. Televisa, which had expanded into the U.S. market in the 1970s and mid-1980s (Sánchez-Ruiz, 2001), in the 1990s pursued a vigorous international strategy to "create a greater dependency on Televisa programming among foreign broadcasters" (Paxman and Saragoza, 2001). The world's leading Spanish-speaking media company also underwent restructuring, cutting costs by U.S. $175 million in 1997 and 1998 ("Televisa Mexico," 1999), which caused its shares to rise by 10 percent ("Mexico's Televisa," 1999).

TV Azteca was privatized during trade negotiations that led to NAFTA, and it was purchased in 1993 for U.S. $643 million ("TV Azteca and Canal," 1998). Its soon-to-be broadened operations consisted of Azteca 7 and Azteca 13, two national stations. In 1997, the company expanded swiftly, issuing U.S. $425 million in publicly traded bonds in February, and going through an initial public offering of over 20 percent of capital stock in August, also grabbing 32 percent of the U.S. $1.4 billion Mexican advertising market, rising to 36 percent in the first quarter of 1998 (ibid.). This, in addition to several domestic joint ventures and foreign media acquisitions, established TV Azteca as a serious competitor to Televisa. Notably, TV Azteca's joint venture with CNI Canal 40 television gave it access to nearly 100 percent of the Mexico City metropolitan area's 22 million television viewers ("TV Azteca and Canal," 1998). The deal entailed TV Azteca's purchase of 10 percent of Canal 40 shares, giving TV Azteca wider exposure by adding a third channel to its lineup, and providing Canal 40 with content from Azteca's production studios. In late 1998, TV Azteca clinched an exclusive free TV-licensing agreement with Disney for its "Kids and Young Adults" Canal 7 ("TV Azteca Signs," 1998), where *Tele Chobis* was broadcast with commercials for various Disney products. TV Azteca's growth led it to announce that it would raise its advertising rates by 40 percent starting in January 1999 (Barrera, 1998). That same month, TV Azteca became embroiled in a dispute with the Chilean government over the way it managed its acquisition of 75 percent of Chile's Channel 4 television, and faced allegations that it did not comply with Chilean law that mandated top executive positions in television stations to be occupied by Chilean nationals ("TV Azteca Denies," 1999). Nonetheless, TV Azteca's shares rose 10 percent in December 1999 ("Mexico's TV," 1999). Since then, TV Azteca has maintained its number two position, in effect sharing duopolistic control of the Mexican media market with leader Televisa.[4]

Predictably, media liberalization in Mexico involved legal changes. The Mexican Federal Copyright Law (FCL), officially published on December 23, 1996, became effective in March 1997, repealing the 1963 Federal Copyright Law. In the new law, television and broadcasting copyrights are recognized, but "ideas," "formulas," and "concepts" are not legally protected ("Highlights of," 1998). A few years earlier, the Law of Cinematography of 1992 repealed a 1941 law requiring that 50 percent of movies be nationally made. According to the 1992 law, this proportion was to be reduced to 30 percent in 1993, and by five more percentiles yearly until it was down to 10 percent by the end of 1997. The cable television industry was also deregulated to allow up to 49 percent non-Mexican ownership (Sánchez-Ruiz, 2001).

These technological and regulatory changes, coupled with increasing autonomy from government intervention, put enormous pressure on Mexican media companies to provide commercially attractive content. In addition to global expansion and joint ventures elaborated previously, heightened competition led to programming that clashed with prevailing social values, such as talk shows inspired by the "trash" talk-show genre in the United States (LaFranchi, 2000). It was in this environment that TV Azteca created and launched *Tele Chobis*, after deciding that it could neither afford to purchase *Teletubbies* for commercial-free broadcasting, nor let Televisa's acquisition of *Teletubbies* broadcast rights for Mexico go unchallenged. TV Azteca thus resorted to program mimicry, running afoul of intellectual property laws, literally illustrating Homi Bhabha's claim in this chapter's epigraph that "the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction" (1994, p. 89). The *Tele Chobis* story consequently embodies a crossroads of historical, economic, technological, and cultural forces, all of which contributed, at different levels and with various intensities, to the creation of a hybrid, transcultural text.

The hybridity of media texts is explained by the media's transnational political economy. Post-Fordist practices and systemic forces account for the fact that hybrid media texts reflect industry imperatives for targeting several markets at once with the same program or, alternatively, are symptoms of commercially motivated "borrowing." In the absence of the present global structure where interlocking regulatory, financial, political, and cultural forces drive a race to reach the highest number of people for the lowest cost and the minimum amount of risk, therefore entailing creative productions that cross and fuse cultural differences, hybridity would likely not be as pervasive in media texts worldwide. However, as the dissection of the Mexican copycat *Tele Chobis* has shown, both the raison d'être and the kiss of death of hybrid television programs are to be found in political-economic arrangements, which in this case included a Mexican industry in transition, embedded in the

North American Free Trade Agreement and the international copyright regime. Granted, media texts, even before the acceleration of the sector's globalization, have always sought and found inspiration in each other, as the example of Hong Kong I used in Chapter One demonstrates, but the contemporary phenomenon of media programs that carry composite aesthetics and fused cultural elements, in both its breadth and depth, is a product of neoliberalization. Hybrid media texts have the intertextual traces of an increasingly standardized global media industry where successful formats are adapted ad infinitum, hybridized to cater to the proclivities of one audience after another, but always remaining firmly grounded in the same commercial logic where hybrid texts are instruments finely tuned in pursuit of profit.