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‘Late-Night Programme’

or

**“Rumpled cushions
for the**

***American Dream*”**

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based on the article by
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1. Introduction **America: The New World**

Welcome to the „New World“! I think the *American Dream* can be traced through history to the middle of this millennium, when the first European settlers immigrated to America leaving the so called „Old World“ behind to get apart from an old system. Basically the United States is generally made up of a collection of immigrants and their descendants from all over the world, who moved there just because of one vision: the premise of a better life. I think it is this vision which is called the „*American Dream*“. America is often considered as a kind of „promised land“, which is not seldom disseminated by TV nowadays. There might have been a change in the development of this wish, of this vision or dream as time went by. In former times the people came to America with a certain idea of what it would be like, but nobody did actually have a clue of what was to expect them. Today you can see pictures of the United States of America, as they are called today, nearly everywhere, as they are transmitted mostly by TV in all parts of the world. Often people envisage the „land of the boundless possibilities“ as they have seen it on the screen, but there are sometimes disappointments the time they actually get there. This is what Hollywood caused for a certain percentage, as thousands of movies conquered the cinemas and TV-screens all over the world this century. But what is it really that makes up the *American Dream*?

Charles Simic once traveled trough Kansas and then drew his images and thoughts in this article called „*Rumpled cushions for the American Dream*“. This article is dealing with that dream on very different sides. A main point of his view is that TV is one of the most powerful media, which is allegedly responsible for how people are influenced on thinking about this vision.

2. America: The ‘Cradle of Freedom’: A Madhouse?

or

Television: Positive or negative medium?

Since the TV-set has been invented it has become a big medium for news and culture affairs, but also for fun. Especially in America it has always played an important part. In former times they said that the Nation would ‘learn’ in front of the TV, what it means to be an American.

Simic thinks that today's America has become very different from the old days, as you can see the country in its confusing variety while you are 'surfing' through the channels. But it is not only confusing, but also appalling. In former times people just came together to share a little time in front of the TV, which also supported community. Today an American live without a TV is unthinkable and so this happening is no longer of importance.

Simic is amazed by the huge mass of channels. As he sits in front of the screen, he nearly gets paralyzed by it, as he finds more than about 350 different channels. This nearly sounds unbelievable to somebody who doesn't come from the States, as this overwhelming variety isn't offered in Germany yet. I think TV on a certain kind reflects the appearance of a country. Additionally, America has got one of the biggest television networks of the world. So, what do they present on 350 channels? There are news, reports, films, movies, presentations and lots more, so that there must be something for everyone in case that he is able to find the channel that he wants to watch. I want to know what those program guides do look like.....So, is this the new kind of 'education' that followed the old one? Television to me seems to be a piece of American culture, but this is maybe a result of my own television consumption. I mean that I am not an American, but the typical American is just considered to be a TV fanatic. The people get up in the morning and before they even switch on the coffeemaker the TV is turned on for the first news of the day or the 'Breakfast Club'. The same happens the time they come home again from work. Roughly 260 million Americans spend over 4 hours in front of their screen at one day; this means 241 minutes per day and per head.¹ So TV definitely is an important media to them. From this it follows that television has a great influence on the way of thinking and also on the *American Dream*. One big point of it is the vision of a better life. But what is a better life? I think the people are quite suggestible, as TV sets standards. So clear that vision might have been in the beginning, so confusing it might be now. 'Good' is not good enough anymore; it has to be 'better'. To live the *American Dream* mainly means to have a good job and earn good money, to have an own area to live, i.e. an own house, or just to be 'somebody'; the main thing is not to be a 'nobody'.

So who dreams the *American Dream*? Is it still everybody by oneself? What has become out of the „cradle of freedom“, as America was used to be called? Simic thinks it has become a madhouse, because it fools itself by making itself contradictory. I think he might be right. The American Dream has probably become a victim of the age of technology.

¹ Source: Television '96: European Key Facts 1996
IP - Vermarktungsgesellschaft

3. America: 'Paradise of Fools'?

America always seemed to be a kind of the *Promised Land*, the perfect place where everybody would be able to realize his dreams. And still today some people might believe that this land has no problems, but this sum doesn't work out. Towards Simic, their eyes are sometimes closed in front of actual problems. If you take apartheid for instance. Even if the days of the big conflicts with the black people may be vanished (just thinking of M. L. King) there is still discrimination, although some people refuse to believe it. Every now and then you get to hear a new scandal like a policeman maltreating a black without a course or something like that. Or if you think of the Indians, the original inhabitants of America and their expulsion. Is there still a thing like morality? What has become out of the 'cradle of freedom'? Is it not for everybody? Obviously this seems or at least seemed to be a point for discussion, which is gladly forgotten.

Another problem is the increasing crime rate. Simic says that their cities would be populated with a huge armed and violent lower class, and I really believe him, because this is what you also get to know even if you live outside the US. I am just thinking of the murders of German tourists in Florida. And what happened was that lots of Germans believed that America is a dangerous place to spend holidays in. This of course was pushed up by the media, but I believe, also according to Mr. Simic, that there is a gigantic criminal underground mobilization, that is not very gladly admitted to exist. There is no doubt about that America got the biggest crime rate of the world. Is this the result of what people did come for to that land?

The American Dream can just hard be lived by *everybody*, I think. There is a big gap which separates the richest from the poorest Americans; there are the people who live in houses as big as castles, but also people who have to live on the streets. Simic says that in the public it isn't spoken about social consequences, which do result from this, and that America is increasingly confronted with the problems you usually connect with those of the Third World. I don't know if you really should do this comparison, but nevertheless there might be a grain of truth in his statement, roughly spoken.

The public life is ruled by this 'AS-IF'- image, which means that everybody pretends to be somebody, who he actually is not at all. Everybody got used to the whole lot, pretending and believing; maybe the wish of this life and this strong believe has lead to this situation. One could almost say that the *American Dream* is developing into an illusion, but maybe just because as an integrated European you don't share that dream and you see it fairly objective.

So is the *American Dream* really just an illusion? Or is it a remnant of the old days and long gone visions? What has become out of that mentioned premise of a better life? Maybe America is a ‘paradise of fools’, as it is called by Simic, as they probably believe in a myth that has gone long ago. There is this conviction to hold this illusion upright to avoid that the actual extent of these difficulties comes to light, probably just for the public welfare. The *American Dream* is something that keeps some people alive.

4. America: A Multinational Civilization

America is famous for its multinational civilization. If you have a look at their ancestors you can see that the population consists of lots of cultures, each with a different history. So if you think of that all these sometimes also opposite societies, that tried to build up a new one, it is amazing that all these people shared the same dream surmounting the barriers of the countries.

All this different people built a new society, and although at a time it seemed that the *American Dream* is no longer true, immigrants didn’t stop flowing into the country, legally and illegally. As the dream faded away, people tried to find some solutions for the upcoming problems, mostly with the so called ‘politics of identity’. Suddenly the Americans didn’t want to define themselves as ‘Americans’ anymore, but they tried to refer to their origins, meaning ethics, religions and race. As a result of that the reasons for some problems were not searched in the American population in a whole, but in detail in some special nations. This may had been used as a pretext to explain why what went wrong. The common culture was no longer an ideal, but therefore just the ‘politics of diversity’. What is it like today? I think the Americans are a nation on their own, but you shouldn’t deny the roots. This is no apology if something doesn’t work out, i.e. who wants to blame who? As this ‘melting pot’ *definitely* consists of different nations, none of them has the right to blame another for whatever, as they maybe tend to do so.

For me just this fact makes it so interesting. I mean so many people move together to live in a big community which builds up a new country. It is inevitable that there are contradictions. The *American Dream* brought them together; they should be able to get it done, too.

5. America: Master or Victim of Technological Progress? **A Land of Thousand Contrasts**

‘Our main illusion is our conviction that we would be most advanced and post-modern.’, says Simic about his own country. The continuous improvements and that strong believe in progress have lead to a different America, of which nobody was ever able to foresee how it would be like, as the *American Dream* developed . Towards Simic, the vision that came into being was based on the ignorance of the people. The one thing everybody intended to have was in their eyes very simple to realize, as a new country just stood at the beginning of a long way to that what today is called ‘United States of America’. But it became very different, as technological progress approached. Today everybody is speaking of ‘the age of information’, ‘information-superhighways’ or the new era of ‘multimedia’. What does this mean to the *American Dream*?

There are still some fundamentalists who want to refuse this progress at any price and who want to hold on to the old values and premises as to the time where they came to live them. So there are people, who believe in the power of future and progress and there are people who just believe in the bible and ancient times. As a conclusion from that: do these people still dream the *same* dream? Maybe the *American Dream* has to be updated...

As I said before, America seems to be a land with big gaps, as I spoke of some people having money in abundance and of some people who have to go hungry. But there is not only this social gap, but also one in the whole appearance of the country, speaking of the din of the big cities and the contradicting silence of the wide lands. If you are going in a city like New York or Los Angeles, for instance, you are getting thousands of impressions at once. You hardly get your rest. Sometimes this enormous din drowns out the problems of your everyday life, and if you are leaving the town and you are on one of these roads to nowhere and you get to see this endless vastness you probably begin to think; to think about yourself and the life you lead. This freedom also frees your mind and soul, as you eventually suddenly see the stars in the sky, which are not artificial at all this time. You are not blinded by the lights of the big city anymore...

This is maybe what technology caused. In former times all you needed or wanted was a little piece of something that you could call your own. Today you sometimes just don’t know what you want at all because there is such a big variety of things. And as we live in a modern world, you have to adapt to it. America, so Simic, might have become too opaque to itself. Nobody has the faintest idea of what is really going on. You are showered with information and attitudes so that I think it must be hard to develop an own opinion without being affected by

the big public. Also referring to the *American Dream*, we might have come full circle here. Maybe he really suffered from this new development. Technology can only be of advantage, if the person who uses it is ready to do so, and only this decides whether you are the master or the victim of progress, which might influence you and your interpretation of the *American Dream*.

6. Closing Words

As far as I am concerned, the *American Dream* is a weird thing. I wonder if the people in America really talk and think about it, just as some individuals do here, or if they just live it. Is it an invisible omnipresent thing or just a phrase that describes something that was thought of in former times? I see a difference between the *American Dream* and the so called ‘American Way of Life’, at least concerning the expression itself. Where for me the way of life is something I have something special on my mind that I am thinking of, the dream is something that you can’t see, feel or taste. Maybe the way of life is just the realization of the dream; something that has given the dream a shape, something that was easier to grasp. Why is it called ‘*American Dream*’, as you want to experience it while you are awake? It’s probably really hard to understand for a non-American, but it’s fascinating, though.

Simic’s article is called ‘Rumpled cushions for the American Dream’, which is an allusion to the art of TV-consumption, which leads through the article like a leitmotiv. It is maybe this common view of Americans hanging on their couches or lying in their beds while watching TV, which almost sounds like a cliché; a way to live while you are awake and waiting for the night to come to dream of something that often just exists in one’s subconscious. As the *American Dream* is to be lived in reality, you might wonder what the real dreams might be like. Maybe there’s just a deep dreamless sleep?

Dreams belong to life just as reality, because we need them by way of compensation for the things, that are beyond reality; often things we just dare to dream of. Dreams tell you secret wishes, which are quite important for a happy life. Probably the American one is one of them. ‘Dream your dreams alive...’, how it is often said. Maybe we are not awake and the whole world is sleeping, while our reality is taking place in our dreams.

Then the *American Dream* wouldn’t be a dream anymore, but it would be real. And still it would just be *their* dream, not ours, especially not mine.

Nevertheless: may the *American Dream* never end...