Preliminary Remarks

However gratefully the author appreciates the initiative of the directors of the Hochschulwochen to make its talks available to its participants in a privately published edition, he nonetheless hesitates to consent to the publication of his own contribution. He is aware of the fact that in his mode of action the spoken and the written word are even farther apart than is generally the case today. If he spoke in such a way as he would have to write for the sake of the binding force of factual representation, he would remain incomprehensible. Nothing, however, that he says can do justice to what he must expect of a text. The more general the topics—and the subject of this published talk was worded in a fatally general way—the greater the difficulties become for someone whom a critic recently and in a friendly manner certified that his production conformed to the dictum “God is in the details.” Where a text would have to provide exact documentary proof, such talks inevitably do not go beyond the dogmatic claim of results. He is thus unable to accept the responsibility for the printed text that follows and merely regards it as aiding the memory of those who were present during his improvisation and who—as a result of the modest stimulations that he provided—want to continue thinking about the discussed questions on their own. The author regards the ubiquitous tendency to record free speech [die freie Rede], as it is called, on tape, and then to disseminate it itself as a symptom of the administered world that even ties down the ephemeral word, whose truth lies in its own transience, and then makes the speaker swear to it. The tape recording is something like the fingerprint of the living mind [lebendigen Geistes]. By making use
My Dear Ladies and Gentlemen!

The term *culture*, which is derived from the Latin word *colere*, means care; that is, *colere* originally referred to the occupation of the peasant, and thereby to a specific relationship to nature, namely, its tending. In the most general sense, one could say that whenever one speaks of culture, one speaks of an area in which people confront nature. But such an overtly general and perhaps slightly vague conception of culture admits varied possibilities of understanding it; in order to simplify the matter, or at least achieve a greater plasticity of the question, I would like to elaborate two typical meanings that appear to me to be connected to the contrast between American and German culture. On the one hand, culture can, in fact, refer to the human being’s coping with nature in the sense of its mastery; that is, domination of both the external nature that opposes us as well as domination of the natural forces in the human being itself—in a word: the control of civilization over human urges and the unconscious. One could characterize such a notion of culture as one whose substance is essentially the molding of reality. I thereby do not want to say that in America reality itself has in a radical sense been shaped, that it has in a positive sense been stripped of its organic nature. Rather, the social processes over there *drüben* are, in a way, certainly just as blind as in any other part of the world. But the conception of culture that predominates over there is definitely one that has to a large extent been distilled from the molding of reality. Such forming of reality above all refers to the shaping of society as a whole, the reciprocal relationships of people, the taming of nature, and the control of its resources—especially, as you well know, through technology. This moment, however, is now confronted by another aspect of the concept of culture. To care for something is not simply the same thing as to dominate it. Tending nature is not simply the same thing as suppressing or exploiting it; rather, the notion of care also contains the moment of conserving something for its own sake, the idea that what human beings acquire and subject to their rule should not be radically broken or eradicated but rather simultaneously preserved in its own being. In order to illustrate this idea of culture, I would like to ask you to, for instance, think of a very good wine, an artificial product, which has been distilled from grapes in a complicated fermentation process. Artificial as it may be, one can nevertheless still taste the earth in which it grew or the grapes from which it was pressed. Think of certain fine *vins du pays*, especially French ones. Such wines are specific products of culture; and
this notion of culture, that is, the idea of preserving that which in nature is simultaneously destroyed \([\text{aufgehoben ist}]\) by human power, is what the European conception of culture is to a large extent based on. This, however, now also entails a certain amount of mindfulness and self-reflection, a moment of internalization if you will, which breaks the immediate power over nature. In Germany in particular, and perhaps more so in Germany than in any other country in the world, this notion of culture results from what in a concise sense might be called \textit{Geisteskultur}. That is, a culture that—to illustrate this conception explicitly—essentially manifests itself in what are called great works—be they of art, philosophy, or scholarship. The differences between the two conceptions of culture, which I first explained to you in a somewhat abstract and conceptual manner, are themselves rooted in the actual social processes of both countries, namely in the fact that—and I again speak in a slightly blunt and exaggerated manner—America is purely a country of the bourgeois revolution; it is a country that has not only been successfully penetrated by this revolution but also one in which this revolution constitutes the precondition of its entire society, a country whose very foundation it has been to arrange society in a consistently bourgeois fashion. Conversely, you all know that the fate of the bourgeois revolution in Germany has remained problematic; the bourgeois revolution in Germany, in the sense of the French Revolution, also failed in 1848, and when it finally appeared to at least formally succeed in 1918, the entire social arrangement had already been changed in such a way that these categories had acquired a totally different meaning. Emphasizing these things is perhaps not entirely superfluous because it allows one to account for the fact that in Germany the notion of culture has received that peculiar spiritualization \([\text{Vergeistigung}]\) of which I am speaking. I believe that it is hardly necessary to draw your attention to the tremendously positive significance of this spiritualization, to the fact that German music and philosophy are indebted to this process. It is, however, equally necessary—even if perhaps not as pleasant—to recall that this process of the spiritualization of culture to a certain degree compensated for the fact that the shaping of reality in accordance with the ideals of the French Revolution or the English Revolution—and thus in accordance with the bourgeois ideals—did not succeed. One, as it were, directed one’s energies inward because the ideals—on account of the firm fabric of the surviving semiabsolutist feudal order—could not be realized. Thereby, German culture not only received the power of intellectual absoluteness, but at the same time it also reflects an aspect of the dearth of reality. That phenomenon, which Hölderlin addresses when he speaks of the Germans as “poor in deed yet full of thought,” is not a natural quality of the German people, of their original composition, but rather a function of the historical dynamic. It has led us to develop the tendency to make absolute
the sphere of the mind [die Sphäre des Geistes] and to forget that all intellectual phenomena [alles Geistige] actually also contain the instruction to put them into practice, that Geist that merely suffices itself and has given up all relationship to the molding of reality has actually ceased being Geist.

Now, from what I have hinted at, one might perhaps already infer that the two notions of culture, which are not merely conceptual ideas but rather represent the social fate of the two countries, also have their negative aspects. In America, the notion of culture is—as we would call it in our ineradicable philosophic language—utterly immanent; that is to say, American culture does not really go beyond the shaping of the external world, the relationships between people, and as far as there are intellectual phenomena that go beyond these things, they are judged by what they can directly contribute to human existence, by what one gets out of them, so to speak. The fact, however, that culture does not transcend the reality of social life also entails the abolition or at least the neutralization of its critical function—namely the implication of more than the merely given. In contrast, the negative aspects of our own conception of culture encompass a certain noncommittal element, the relinquishment of intervention and the forgetting that the idea of culture in the sense of a conscious clash of external and internal nature also essentially involves the shaping of reality and, in particular, political reality. One hardly exaggerates if one argues that the price for the infinite sublimation of what we call Geisteskultur is elements of rawness or rudeness in our social life, in the living together of people, and, especially, the forms of political life. If what one repeatedly hears is true, namely, that some of the most frightful hangmen that National Socialism produced did not only listen to Bruckner symphonies when recovering from their abominable deeds but also understood the music perfectly well—and I believe that we have had to learn that such antinomies really exist, that one can simultaneously be a hangman and understand Bruckner symphonies—then that, as it were, would merely be the extreme demonstration of that moment of the neutralization of culture, its splitting off from reality as a special sphere. The prejudices or false judgments that the two peoples pronounce on each other probably consist in the fact that, quite simply, the two notions of culture that I elaborated for you are applied to the other side in an unrefracted and unmediated way. Thus, we a priori conceive of “culture” as Geisteskultur, and when we are confronted with the American molding of life and its forms of civilization, we exhibit a certain tendency to pass the disastrous judgment that “they are uncultured,” a prejudice that, however, is then strongly provoked by certain phenomena within the American Geisteskultur that I would be the last to deny. Conversely, Americans—to whom culture means a specific relationship between people on the one hand and between people and reality on the other—tend to harbor a very obvious and hardly less dangerous
prejudice, namely to regard our culture as limited to aesthetics, as a sort of game, as a mere world of images that they then dismiss as fraud—the cause being quite simply a certain lack of tradition and experience in specifically intellectual matters [geistige Dinge]. The—from a pragmatic point of view—unrealized aspect of our culture appears to them as a shirking of hard work and effort. Unless I—with my American observations—am very much mistaken, a—in the European sense of the term—cultivated person will encounter the suspicion that he or she has not really romped about. That prejudice contains a justified moment criticizing privilege, of which our culture is never free; it also, however, contains rancune [resentment] against the person whose interests go beyond the practical business of everyday life.

Let me now first of all talk to you about the German image of America.

One is struck first by the cliché of the so-called American materialism. To a person coming to America, one of the strongest impressions probably pertains to the overwhelming abundance of goods that he or she is offered. Sometimes I cannot help suspecting a note of envy in the thought that a world that produces so many goods has to be a merely materialistic one. Precisely with regard to this point, I believe, it is imperative to exercise caution and particular sensitivity. For this abundance of goods that one encounters in America exhibits a feature that is difficult to describe to someone not acquainted with it, but which one should nevertheless neither deny nor make light of. This aspect is reminiscent of the land of milk and honey. You just have to walk through one of the so-called American supermarkets, one of the huge stores that are especially characteristic of the new large cities and centers of the West, and you will have the—however deceptive and superficial—feeling: the time of privation is over, it is the boundless and complete satisfaction of material needs as such. But at this point we should very seriously ask ourselves: does not all culture in our European sense of the term, that is, in the sense of intellectual culture [geistige Kultur], contain an instruction to achieve this utopian fulfillment? Think of any great work of the European Geisteskultur. I at this point do not at all distinguish between Germany and Europe, for I have lived in America for too long to not have at least become Americanized insofar as that for me Europe in certain respects, having come together, has formed a unity. Think of Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare. Were its motif not the fulfillment, the boundless fulfillment of love, the full erotic love between these two people, the overwhelming power of this play would hardly exist. If this play did not exhibit—maybe not as a tendency but certainly as the source of strength that gives life to everything—the demand for happiness, for the freedom to give joy to one another, for fulfillment and for the absence of restrictions, then even the poem about the nightingale
and the lark—one of the greatest poems that anyone has ever written in a European language—would not be the work of art, the intellectual work [geistiges Gebilde] that it is. Taking a little time to watch American children is bound to yield one of the most peculiar impressions one can receive in the United States. I do not want to claim that this is always only a pleasure. It is not at all unlikely that when one unsuspectingly crosses a street a child might throw a stone in one’s direction; if one then goes to the child’s house in order to complain to his or her parents about their offspring’s conduct, the parents might then object and argue that one does not understand enough about progressive education. But the way in which every American child can devour an ice cream cone and thereby at any moment find a fulfillment of childhood bliss—something to which our children once vainly craned their necks—is truly a part of the fulfilled utopia. It is reminiscent of the peacefulness and dearth of fear and threat that one associates with the millennium. The abundance of goods and the fact that want has receded—despite what the great American novelists have told us about the South—does endow everyday experience with a moment of peacefulness and serenity that we in Europe have almost wholly forfeited. What I am talking about is a sort of friendliness that one can in particular observe among the so-called simple people such as the gas pump attendant, the baker who delivers the bread, or the man who drops off the natural spring water at one’s house because one cannot drink the common tap water—the conduct of these people is indicative of how strongly the society has been penetrated by a humanity that is quite capable of compensating for the fact that these people perhaps cannot pronounce the names of Bach and Beethoven as correctly as we would think appropriate with a proper education.

I know quite well that even in America—the land of monopoly capitalism—nothing is for free. I have spoken of the abundance of goods and the land of milk and honey, but that does not mean that I am so naive to believe that the abundance of goods over there, just as in any other country, is not in a certain proportion to the purchasing power of those who have to buy these goods. But even if one is aware of the fact that in America—just like everywhere else and perhaps in an even more organized and reckless manner—production is undertaken to generate profit and not to serve people, one must nevertheless acknowledge that—by virtue of the enormous growth of the technical apparatus over there—the amount of commodities that are at people’s disposal is much greater, meaning that despite the profit motive, each individual’s share is also much greater than in Europe. I repeat: Even in America nothing is for free. But one can well say that the bourgeois principle, which is closely connected to the principle of humanity, has not only been radically thought through but also practically consummated. America is a pure exchange society.
But this now does not only mean that everything takes place for the sake of profit—and in a certain sense one can say that in America everything does take place for the sake of profit and that one can somehow track the traces of market exchange to the most sublime human relations. This universality of the exchange principle, however, also means that everybody is there for everybody else and that nobody entrenches him- or herself in the limitedness of his or her own individual interest as much as is common in our old Europe. The political form of democracy is infinitely closer to people’s awareness of life. This infuses an element of peacefulness and benevolence into American life that we in Germany—especially in the wake of the pent-up malevolence and pent-up envy of the years 1933 to 1945—should neither take lightly nor easily dismiss. In America one can detect a moment of the— I am almost inclined to say—lack of aggression of people, which has a lot more to do with the concept of actual humanity than we would generally think. This actual humanity, in turn, is connected to the fact that in a purely bourgeois exchange society like the American one, democracy itself with its règles du jeu and procedures is infinitely more substantial than it is in Germany; that is, the democratic forms themselves do not stand facing the people as something foreign. The statements one keeps on encountering in German sociological studies as “we are not yet ready for democracy”—and I sometimes have the feeling as if 60 million people in Germany could say that they were not yet ready for democracy while they in each individual case actually refer to the other 59,999,999 people—would simply be unthinkable in America. The forms of parliamentary democracy have extended their reach into all kinds of informal groups, clubs, school classes, and God knows what, and therefore have also become much more pronounced than would be imaginable in Germany to this day. In America, the proximity of political forms and life is incomparably greater. I do not want to say thereby that America is immune to a tipping over into a totalitarian system of government. Such a danger is part of the tendency of modern society itself, and it would be totally ridiculous to assume that a particular country in the world today were not threatened by this danger, that the problem of totalitarianism could not arise anew at any moment just as we are so very painfully experiencing it right now in France. But one does have to say that the power of resistance against totalitarian movements is probably greater in America than, I almost dare to say, any European country—perhaps with the exception of England, which, in many more ways than we are accustomed to assume, represents a link between America and the Continent.

We tend to regard the notion of adaptation, of adjustment, which plays such a great and dangerous role in American culture, as something merely negative, as the obliteration of the spontaneity and autonomy of the individual. But it is probably an illusion—one that Goethe and Hegel, by
the way, eminently criticized—to believe that the process of humanization and cultivation proceeds from inside to outside. It essentially and especially takes place through the process of externalization [Entäußerung], as Hegel called it. We do not actually become human beings by fulfilling ourselves as distinct individuals, but by stepping out of our shells, by entering into relations with other people, and by—in a certain sense—abandoning ourselves to them. Only by going through such externalization do we determine ourselves as individuals, and not by—as Wilhelm von Humboldt’s concept of Bildung, for instance, expected of us—pouring water over ourselves as if we were plants in order to become comprehensively educated personalities. This moment, which in America is extolled under the awful label of extroversion, has nevertheless also positively proven itself over there. I would like to impart something perhaps quite shocking to you. I am thinking of the category of keep smiling, the obligatory beam. In America, you will repeatedly have the experience that every female store clerk will delightfully smile while serving you. This will at first repel you because you will sense that this smile is not the smile of that particular individual, but that her boss forced it upon her, that the clerk has learned to smile that way in a so-called charm school. You will also notice that the smile somehow reveals its obligatory character, especially when it does not fully succeed. But I think we should again not make it too easy for ourselves. One could probably argue that a person whom external command thus induces to friendliness will, in the final analysis, more likely also attain a certain humanity in his or her relationship to other people than someone who—only to be identical with him- or herself (as if that identity were always desirable)—puts on a malicious and grouchy expression and intimates that to him or her the other person does not really exist and should refrain from interfering in his or her inwardness—which frequently, as it turns out, is nonexistent. Without in the least failing to recognize these negative moments, we should make an effort not to behave superficially and undialectically ourselves while simultaneously being indignant at the superficiality of others.

The sort of externalization of American life that I have characterized for you could be described as a universal victory of the Enlightenment in the sense of the pan-European Enlightenment process. All sorts of stuffy organizations such as the women’s organizations—of which you have probably also heard something already—notwithstanding, there are infinitely fewer taboos in America than there are over here; there is infinitely less blind authority that people blindly obey and that then—precisely on account of the blindness of obedience—produces destructive tendencies. America permits a freedom of discussion and exhibits the possibility of talking about issues that not only do not exist in Europe; such discursive freedom would also arouse suspicion by running counter to what one
would—in our German and very alarming jargon of authenticity—call (and I am quoting a German remark): “What matters are not discussions but encounters.” But this can only mean that in a murky sphere of togetherness the moment of friction between competing thoughts, the notion that the various forms of reason work away at one another, is cut off. A moment ago, I talked about the American relation to children. I think it is almost impossible for us to imagine the extent to which American culture allows children to grow up in a freer, less oppressive, and less coercive environment than is still the case in Germany; and, in particular, to what degree the insights of contemporary psychology have entered the fashioning even of everyday life. A mother who knows, no matter how rough and superficial this knowledge may be, that if she beats her child, he or she will probably have to pay for the beating with a neurosis as a grown-up—such conduct appears to me to be closer to humanity than a form of conduct that politely explains that one has long been past Freud because Freud no longer measures up to the depths of one’s existence, or a form of conduct that throws psychoanalysis as such onto the scrap heap and, in the final analysis, talks one’s way out of it by proclaiming that if one only thoroughly beats one’s children, they will make better soldiers. I would say that when one criticizes so-called American shallowness, one should take into consideration that the freedom from authority in a very specific and fruitful sense has made more headway in the United States than in Germany.

If I now, however, talk of freedom and authority, I approach a very difficult point. In one sense, people’s conduct in America is certainly less authoritarian and authority-bound than it is here. In another sense, it is probably more authority-bound. Allow me to recall that the bourgeois principle of a pure exchange society has been put into effect in America with utmost consistency. This, however, now also means that practically everything is confiscated that transcends this exchange principle and the closed operations of society. Presumably, this basically accounts for the fact that a concept of Geist whose substance would be reconcilable with our understanding of the term does not exist in the mainstream of American culture; rather, such Geist is a priori oppositional and nonconformist. This was no different at the time of Edgar Allan Poe and Concord, that is, Emerson and Thoreau, than it was at the time of Melville or than it is today in American avant-garde literature. This moment, namely that everyone is there for everyone else and that everything that exists only does so as a being-for-something-else and not as a being-in-itself, generates a form of pressure that—in a certain manner—is much greater than the authoritarian pressure that weighs on us. What I mean, of course, is the pressure of conformity, the pressure to be like everyone else, to be in no way different, to not stand out. Tocqueville was the first to have precisely formulated this experience. By the way, it is just this element of conformity...
Adorno

Kultur and Culture

and this pressure of conformity that make life so particularly hard for intellectual Europeans in America. We are usually faced only with the choice of either capitulating before the status quo (and then, as many emigrants have done, paying for this capitulation with uncritical identification with America) or choosing isolation. Either choice prevents us from achieving a true dialectic between the American experience and what we ourselves are. A third way hardly appears to be open to anyone. That is perhaps the tragic fatality that at least today characterizes the relationship between German and American culture. If you now ask me to illustrate this negative aspect of American culture equally drastically, I would like to quote a remark by Hölderlin that runs: “I understood the language of the ether, but I never understood the language of man.” Now, there are today enough nonconformist poets who more or less modestly struggle along—and sometimes not so modestly at all—as professors at some colleges, and one can assume that—by virtue of their intellectual apperception [geistige Apperzeption] and reflection—even such a remark as the one by Hölderlin might penetrate the American discussion. It is hard to deny, however, that the quote is infinitely removed from the American awareness of life. It is hard to deny that any American would at first ask: What is that supposed to mean, “I understood the language of the ether, but I never understood the language of man”; the ether doesn’t speak a language, there is no other language than the language of human beings, and what you call the language of the ether is really only a psychological projection of your own language. It is hard to deny that any normal American college student would respond in that way and that the whole awareness of life is influenced by such consciousness. In the American cultural debate—at least on the mass cultural level—one frequently encounters such questions as “Why has America never produced a Beethoven or Tchaikovsky?” As before, that is a literal quote from an American publication with an immense circulation. Now, one might respond to that question by arguing that the ego-ideal of American children—the ego-ideal by which one judges any kind of achievement whatsoever over there—is a priori so different from ours that the will to become a Beethoven or Tchaikovsky—provided you let me get away with the barbarism of such a wording—cannot really come about in the first place. A child who hit upon such an idea would probably be branded an effeminate and possibly homosexual “sissy” and be walloped by his classmates from the first day onward; he would have absolutely no chance to develop properly if he seriously had such aspirations. The ego-ideal after which one fashions one’s personality is that of success; this ego-ideal represents the social appreciation of one’s own existence, as it were, because—according to the American cultural ideal that I have hinted at—only in the actual social reality does one seek the power through which culture is to prove its worth and confirm itself. What the American con-
sciousness totally lacks — except in the case of the “expatriates” and deliberate nonconformists — is the notion of quality that cannot be remunerated. Granted: whatever is special and exceptional, whatever goes beyond the existing, has a hard time everywhere in the world. But when one recalls the German intellectual stirrings [Geist] that took place around 1800 or the intellectual forces [geistige Energien] that were unleashed on a European scale in the year 1910, then one has to concede that — at least by the standard of Geisteskultur — the social prerequisites for the formation of significant cultural achievements — that is, achievements not easily brought into line with the status quo — were much greater over here. What America lacks is the protective cover, so to speak, the insulating layer under which talent can develop that is not immediately absorbed in the assimilation to whatever is different. What America above all lacks are the feudal, the nonmarket residues of society and — as I have indicated — an old upper class. It is a peculiar dialectic that the residues of a precapitalist order in which the exchange principle had not yet universally asserted itself materially and intellectually give life to precisely that which is modern, avant-garde and not remunerated. America is a completely socialized society. One can again and again encounter the conviction that a person who believes that his or her theoretical point of view is correct and that everyone else or a large majority of other people are wrong a priori has to be a person tending toward insanity and paranoia; yet it is precisely this moment of resistance — which indeed does not lack paranoid elements — in which any intellectual freedom [geistige Freiheit] and any intellectual productivity [geistige Produktivität] is actually rooted at all. I might at this point be permitted to draw your attention to an aspect of which one usually does not think when discussing these problems. An entire intellectual sphere that has been central to European consciousness failed to develop in America, namely the sphere of speculative metaphysics in the broadest sense. Compared to the objectively prevailing spirit [objektiv herrschender Geist], names such as Emerson, Royce, and Whitehead are practically meaningless. At least in the mainstream of American life, the positive belief in religion — that is, religion in a frequently sectarian, inflexible, and “fundamentalist” sense — was immediately replaced by the equally positive and, if you like, inflexible belief in science, its positive results, in that which lends itself to quantification; in contrast, the sphere of the autonomous, self-reflective, and truly free thought did not really arise between these two extremes. And I believe that only by realizing that America did not substantially go through the experience of speculative thought can one understand certain tendencies of American Geist — particularly those of American scholarship. I, for instance, have in mind the universal tendency to retort, “Where is the evidence?” whenever someone makes a claim. This motive has a salutary quality when compared to a certain Continental
tendency of rabid thought, that is, thought that makes itself absolute, that
issues itself as a decree. But at the same time it also exhibits the negative
quality of amounting to a kind of prohibition on thought. A professor with
whom I am friends told me that at Columbia University a student of art
history was once told at the beginning of his studies that he was there in
order to do research and not to think. Now, that is a caricature and no
doubt a rare case, but it does at least exemplify a tendency.

Let me add that such repressive tendencies of conformism are now
also economically brought together in the powerful system of the Ameri-
can culture industry, which, in a way, represents a totally reified system of
heteronomy. It is an all-enveloping mechanism that leaves nothing outside
its systemic totality—not even the sphere of the mind [geistige Organisa-
tion]. It is something entirely natural for an American writer who submits
a work of his or hers to a publisher to be told that his or her piece needs
an “editing” in order to be marketable. After an article of mine had been
accepted by one of the most respected scholarly journals in America, it was
sent back to me in an edited form that prevented me from recognizing my
own thoughts. When I then withdrew my piece, I received a letter that was
both friendly and devoid of understanding. It stated that it was precisely
the scholarly uniformity with which all articles were “edited” to which the
journal owed its extraordinary effectiveness; the letter further claimed that
it was extraordinarily foolish of me to forgo this opportunity to disseminate
my thoughts—thoughts that had been all but wiped out by the editing.
I merely want to mention in passing that a book that proceeds not in the
manner customary there, but instead dialectically, runs the risk of being
called “badly organized” because at the beginning and at the end of each
paragraph one does not announce where the paragraph will lead or why it is
there at all. The almost universal practice of arranging music or cutting to
size film scenes is part of the same sphere. It is further typical of this sphere
that it—when one publishes something—immediately poses the question,
“At which audience do you aim?” instead of assessing the publication on its
own merit; that is to say, a publication is first judged in the categories of
its possible effect rather than as something of inherent value. The way in
which one tends to associate American jazz—the objection being uttered
here, of course, is that the jazz I have in mind is a specific kind of jazz and
not jazz in general [nicht der allgemeine Jazz]—with avant-garde trends in
music is a symptom of complete disorientation. It stems from the fact that
we in Europe largely fail to penetrate the veil of standardization with which
the culture industry covers everything, or, perhaps a more fitting image,
the cellophane in which it wraps up everything.

Let me finally also remark on the problem of historical continuity.
We are used to accusing Americans of a dearth of historical sense, of
a dearth of tradition in general. That is a nonseller in the inventory of
culturally conservative European anti-Americanism. This is the point, however, which I have to register as the gravest injustice, for the historical trend leads to an Americanization of Europe rather than that (as ideologues on both sides of the Atlantic do not tire to claim) America is in the process of—provided one only grants it the time to placidly grow and develop—emulating German or European culture. One can judge this as critically as one wants to, of course, but should nevertheless first of all take note of it as something that is both indisputable and decisive for Europe. What is also relevant here is the problem of the loss of historical consciousness. My Göttingen colleague, Hermann Heimpel, has—without citing America as an example—shown in a very detailed fashion that German historical consciousness is in the process of disintegrating; that is to say, we also tend to forget everything we are used to accusing the Americans of not knowing. In all of these matters, it is not America that is the latecomer nation, but, on the contrary, Europe that lags behind America. When one discusses the distorted relationship to history, one should at least pose the question if the false German renaissance of Luchow’s Restaurant in New York is not perhaps preferable to the Americanism with which we have turned Rothenburg into a souvenir, and, I would have almost said, Salzburg as well. But we can certainly learn from the Americans no longer to take the circumstances into which we are born for granted, no longer to regard the cultural circumstances under which we live as inevitable; instead, we should develop a kind of freedom toward our own history and conditions of existence that we have hitherto not really attained. At this point, I only want to add one more example: A pianist with whom I am friends once told me that during the crossing between the United States and South America a fellow passenger had inquired about his profession. When the passenger heard that my friend was a pianist, he said to him, “Well, many entertainers now go to South America.” My friend was very indignant at this remark and was most likely justified in his indignation; it is barbaric to classify someone who wants to perform Beethoven sonatas or Schumann as a kind of clown. Yet even this moment that reminds us that even the most supreme art can be regarded as—as Thomas Mann once expressed it—a sort of higher joke is something that can teach artists like us a little self-reflection, a limitation of our work’s claim to absoluteness, from which we can probably only benefit. For my part, I am much more concerned about the American tendency to take over control of culture, as it were, to make it a matter of little old ladies’ committees, than I am about the notion of the entertainer—a concept that does not immediately suggest itself to me either. But even here I would like to remark that this situation—as it, for instance, manifests itself in the monotony of most musical programs—is not the universal state of affairs over there. What seems to be in the offing is similar to what happened in Rome during Hellenistic
times: It is not entirely inconceivable that—in view of the sale of European intellectuals and the flocking of the actual exponents of European culture to America—a change might occur.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you now ask me what one should do with regard to the mutual understanding of the two cultures, I am first of all inclined to respond in the same way that I always respond when asked what one should do, namely, to answer that one should first of all try not to stubbornly insist on one’s own viewpoint; instead, one should attempt to look at and understand things in the most complex manner, in the manner in which I today—however insufficiently—tried to clarify them for you. Such an approach is impeded on both sides of the Atlantic: Over there by the strange notion of being “God’s Own Country,” an idea that American cultural critics have intensively analyzed; over here by a certain kind of collective narcissism that basically leads one to repress any critical thought one might have about German matters, and which a priori produces the objection “Yes, but . . .”

But I believe—and I thereby want to bring my talk to a close—that what is important is not that one simply (because one is so nice, friendly, and enlightened) comes to a mutual understanding. It is equally unimportant to realize that everything has its positive and its negative sides. If my talk were to be understood in this sense, it would be misunderstood. Rather, what is important is that, over here and over there, one retains control of critical thought instead of capitulating before the superior strength of the status quo and saying, “That’s the way it is, that’s the way it must be, one has to accept it.” What we should try to overcome, here and there, is actually nothing else than our becoming hardened against critical thought; I wanted to achieve nothing more than to stimulate your thoughts and contribute to a certain liquefaction of congealed contrasts [verflüssung geronnener Gegensätze] that I admittedly could not present to you in any other form than a congealed one, precisely because—in the reified world of the present—they simply are congealed.

—Translated by Mark Kalbus