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Hopes and dreams of candy

A new documentary explores Germans' complex and ambivalent attitudes to American pop culture, from post-war affection to contemporary scorn. David Gordon Smith talks to director Meaghan Kimball about her film 'Blau Jeans'.



"I don't even think that America *has* culture," says the young German woman in a Nirvana t-shirt, speaking English with something of an affected British accent.

The contentious statement is just one of many strong opinions heard in a new documentary 'Blau Jeans', which explores the impact of American popular culture on Germany.



In the film, German celebrities like 'Element of Crime' singer-songwriter Sven Regener confess to their love of American stars such as Elvis and Louis Armstrong, young Germans describe how they lusted after American blue jeans growing up in the GDR, and earnest commentators deconstruct processes of cultural influences.

Filmmaker Meaghan Kimball

All manner of cultural icons are touched upon in the one-hour film, from Spiderman to McDonald's to Star Wars, as Germany's love-hate relationship with all things American is investigated. The picture that emerges from the documentary is of a country simultaneously fascinated by America and Americana while resenting the extent of its cultural influence.

As an American she says she was shocked by the extent of American culture and how "in" it seemed to be.

"Across the street there was a big Starbucks, full of young Germans drinking Starbucks coffee. Yet on the other hand people were snobby about America too - being appalled by the pop music on the radio, and of course our political problems with the then-looming war in Iraq.



Blau Jeans explores the influence of American pop culture on Germany

"My curiosity led me to explore the role American culture played in modern Germany, which was the touchstone for a bigger story about the shift in relationship between Germany and America. "

Blue jeans and candy

Kimball says she was surprised by the extent of the influence. "It was so strong. On the other hand Germany and Berlin really had their own quirky style so I don't think they took it too seriously.

"Once I got deeper into the subject, I realized that the influence from America was quite incredible, and I actually gained new appreciation for the good things that America and our culture did - for example in the post World War Two period, with the Berlin airlift helping all of the people in Berlin survive and lift their morale with blue jeans and hopes and dreams of candy."

Attitudes have changed since then, she says. "Unfortunately that feeling of affection is not so strong anymore, and I had to really look back into the past of Germany to find this affection for America."

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A symbol of hope

Kimball says one of the most interesting people she interviewed was Dr. Prof. Winfried Fluck, Professor and Chair of American Culture at the JF Kennedy Institute at the Free University in Berlin. "His story was just so amazing to me as an American from my generation. He grew up in bombed-out Berlin and the Americans and American culture were very dear to his and Germans' hearts at this time.

"When he describes the American soldiers as a symbol of hope in jeans from a different planet, I really understood the impact we once had, and also had a deeper appreciation for the German-American relationship at one time."

Walking away

She also learned how the fall of the Berlin Wall played an important part in the development of the relationship. "Germany no longer needed the US to protect it, and so in some ways it was like Germany found their own confidence to walk away from America.

"I am not sure that there are parallel developments with the cultural influence, because I think American pop culture still is everywhere, so for Germans they are connected to America continuously."

Not a typical American

As any expat who lives in Germany knows, there is a lot of anti-American sentiment going around these days. How did people react to her as an American making a film about Germany? "I think people were put off that I was making the film, but because I was American and curious about their point of view, they appreciated that.

"The main problem I heard about Americans is how self-centered we are and that we have no interest in other people or countries. So I was not the typical American to them and that probably worked to my advantage."

Another insight

Kimball believes the film may give both Americans and Germans another insight into their own culture. "I think one of the best ways to learn is to hear from someone outside of your world. It is that outsider's point of view that gives insight into things you might not notice because you look at them everyday.

"Americans will learn about why people around the world do have mixed feelings about us, and it is not just the political aspects that trouble people. There are certain characteristics that have come to be known as 'American' that people in this film really articulate. Some are wonderful virtues and others are not so nice.

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"At the same time we get new insight into Germans and Germany as well. I adore the Germans and I think that many Americans don't have an understanding of them at all. This film explains their framework, from the post World War Two generation, to the former easterners, to the new Germans now ."
