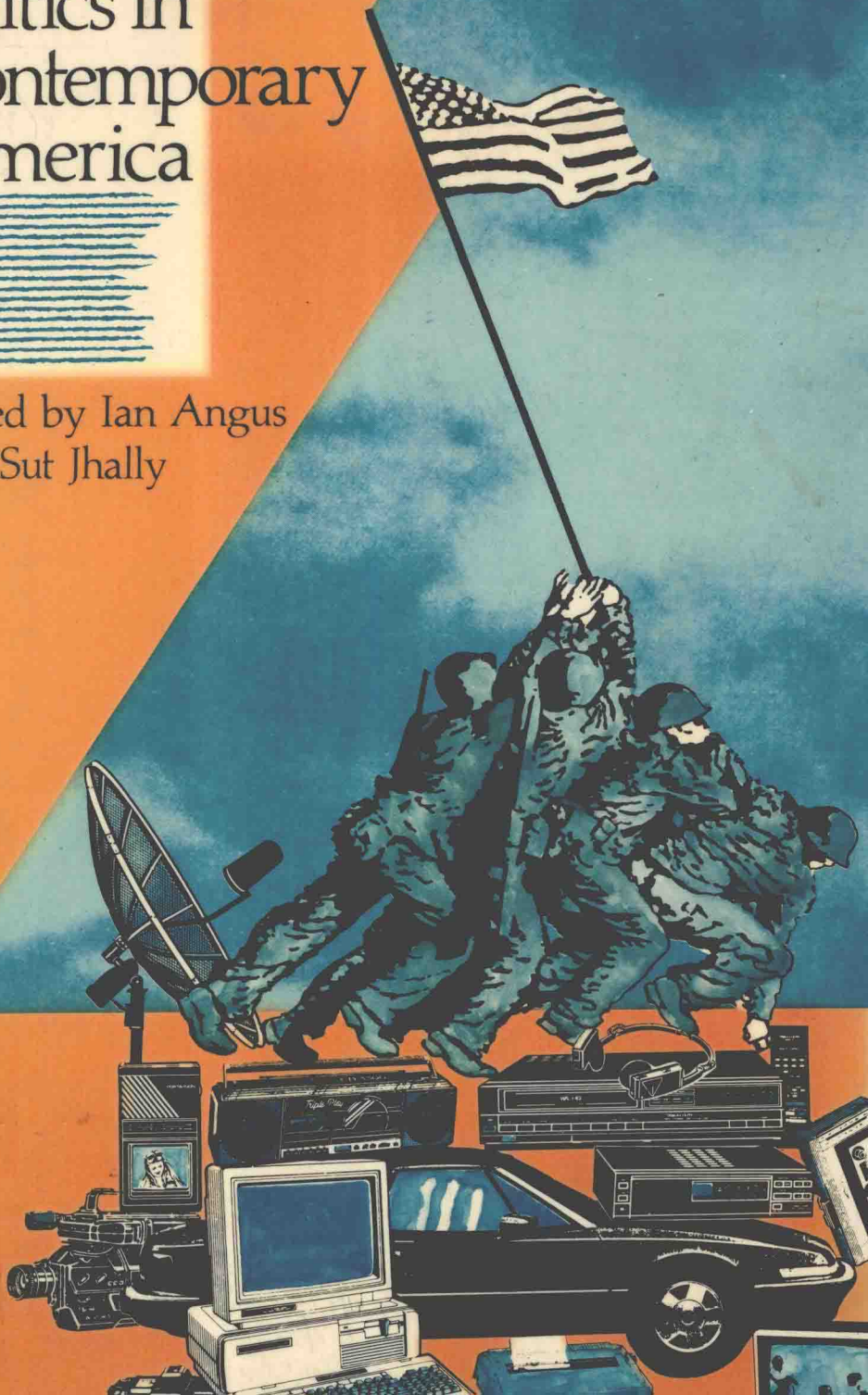


Cultural Politics in Contemporary America

Edited by Ian Angus
and Sut Jhally



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Dedicated to the memory of
Joe Hill
Wobbly, labor militant,
and genius of cultural politics
Murdered by the Authorities
of the State of Utah
November 19, 1915

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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
<i>Part I: EMPIRE AND CONSUMPTION</i>	
1. Requiem for the American Empire Gore Vidal	17
2. The Imperial Cannibal Bill Livant	26
3. American Empire and Global Communication Eileen Mahoney	37
4. Power, Hegemony, and Communication Theory Leslie Good	51
5. The Political Economy of Culture Sut Jhally	65
6. Advertising and the Development of Consumer Society Stuart Ewen	82
7. Circumscribing Postmodern Culture Ian H. Angus	96

Part II: DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 8. | In Living Color: Race and American Culture
Michael Omi | 111 |
| 9. | Cultural Conundrums and Gender: America's
Present Past
Jean Bethke Elshtain | 123 |
| 10. | Working Class Culture in the Electronic Age
Stanley Aronowitz | 135 |
| 11. | Nature in Industrial Society
Neil Evernden | 151 |

Part III: THEMES IN POPULAR CULTURE

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 12. | Sexual Politics
Ellen Willis | 167 |
| 13. | Action-Adventure as Ideology
Gina Marchetti | 182 |
| 14. | Vehicles for Myth: The Shifting Image of the
Modern Car
Andrew Wernick | 198 |
| 15. | Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic of
Technology and Magic
Sut Jhally | 217 |
| 16. | The Importance of Shredding in Earnest: Reading
the National Security Culture and Terrorism
James Der Derian | 230 |
| 17. | Television and Democracy
Michael Morgan | 240 |
| 18. | MTV: Swinging on the (Postmodern) Star
Lawrence Grossberg | 254 |

Part IV: THE LOGIC OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 19. | The Decline of American Intellectuals
Russell Jacoby | 271 |
| 20. | The Myth of the Information Society
William Leiss | 282 |

21. Limits to the Imagination: Marketing and Children's Culture Stephen Kline	299
22. The Privatization of Culture Herbert Schiller	317
23. Media Beyond Representation Ian H. Angus	333
24. Postmodernism: Roots and Politics Todd Gitlin	347
Notes	361
Contributors	386

Introduction

Ian H. Angus and Sut Jhally

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.

Guy Debord

Image and Identity

We live in a world continually transformed by a proliferation of images. Media representations substitute for the social action needed to address "real life" concerns. Violence against women intensifies and the response by right-wing fundamentalists and left-wing feminists is to unite to remove the images of pornography from the iconography of our culture. Polls indicate that most Americans want to maintain the Welfare State and reduce military spending while a right-wing Hollywood actor wins the Presidency in a landslide victory on the basis of his "communication skills." The homeless huddle outside the gates of the White House and the poverty level rises while the media assure us that the American Dream is alive and well. Racial tensions increase and blacks and minorities are subjected to violent physical attacks as Bill Cosby tops the television ratings. Social commentators bemoan the general knowledge and literacy skills of the young, as children dutifully chant advertising jingles and hypnotically watch the space adventures of characters created by toy manufacturers. The nuclear arsenal builds, children's nightmares of holocaust intensify, and comic-book fantasies of protection from space dominate disarmament negotiations. Vietnam veterans protest intervention in Central America while Hollywood attempts to convince teenage America that a lost war was in fact a victory. As Bruce Springsteen sings of alienation and frustration in the heartland of America and devotes funds to food banks and trade unions, Chrysler offers him \$12 million to use "Born in the USA" as

an advertising slogan in a nationalistic campaign to assure us that the "pride is back."

In contemporary culture the media have become central to the constitution of social identity. It is not just that media messages have become important forms of influence on *individuals*. We also identify and construct ourselves as *social beings* through the mediation of images. This is not simply a case of people being dominated by images, but of people seeking and obtaining pleasure through the experience of the consumption of these images. An understanding of contemporary culture involves a focus on both the phenomenology of watching and the cultural form of images.

The essays in this book probe the dimensions of what we call "cultural politics." By this phrase we do not intend a narrow definition of either the realm of culture as referring to artistic production or of politics as referring to the formal electoral process. Instead, we focus on a wider definition of both terms that refers to the complex process by which the whole domain in which people search and create meaning about their everyday lives is subject to politicization and struggle.

The central issue of such a cultural politics is the exercise of power in both institutional and ideological forms and the manner in which "cultural practices" relate to this context. People create their own meaning, but as Marx noted, "not in conditions of their own choosing." Understanding the manner in which institutional and ideological structures act as limits to the possibilities of cultural practices is indispensable to social action directed to our real problems.

The power of representations in the formation of social identity occurs within the broader political economy of culture and society as a whole. The 1980s have been characterized by three related movements regarding the culture industries. First, there has been an increasing integration of the media within the broader control of transnational corporations, such that there is a severe restriction on the autonomy of the media from the influence of business and commerce. Second, there has been an increasing concentration of ownership of the media, such that there are far fewer independent voices available in the United States to contribute to a democratic dialogue. Fewer and fewer companies own more and more media outlets.

Third, power is not only exercised through direct control of the cultural realm by economic force or the state but by blurring the boundaries between the economic and cultural spheres. The media have increasingly become just another sphere of business such that their uniqueness and centrality as cultural forms are submerged beneath their treatment as commodities like any other. As Mark Fowler, Commissioner of the FCC under the Reagan administration

remarked, “television is just like any other business . . . it is a toaster with pictures.” Commodification is the form that cultural life assumes under these conditions and the goal of critical cultural analysis should be to ask what possibilities this opens up and what forms of expression, activity, and understanding it mitigates against.

On the basis of the first two developments, it is possible to understand the combination of national identity spectacles and secrecy in contemporary American politics. Alexander Cockburn has referred to the increasing presentation of events as a kind of “electronic Nuremberg rally” where only one kind of interpretation is allowed and endlessly repeated.¹ Alternative readings are not presented or allowed to intrude. The media coverage of the invasion of Grenada, the bombing of Libya, and the explosion of the Space Shuttle are examples of this “rally” principle, where rituals of patriotism and national identity whip up popular sentiment against the “enemy other.” Simultaneously, whereas once the media were used by the government to report imperial activities, the bulk of these activities have now become covert and secret. For example, the widespread anger and revolt that followed President Nixon’s announcement in 1970 of the bombing of Cambodia led to a political opposition around these events that brought to a head several years of development of public opposition to the undeclared war in Vietnam. The murders at Kent State and Jackson State were the culmination of state repression of this opposition. In retrospect, it is important to note that this response was called forth by Nixon himself in the TV broadcast speech that disclosed the military’s bombing inside the Cambodian border. What if that announcement had not been made? Government officials and those engaged in putting into practice an imperial foreign policy have learned this lesson. Now the problem is secrecy; the facts are withheld, covered up, and — even if finally exposed — they are distanced from the event and diffused in their effect. At most, the public resents the secrecy; they are at arm’s length from any viable response to the events themselves. While nations, especially nations with foreign policies that may be criticized by the population, have always had some tendency to secrecy, this has become much more pervasive since the political right has learned the lessons of protest against the Vietnam war. Oliver North is only the tip of a much deeper program of government and military secrecy, a situation in which the media no longer play the role of assisting informed public discussion. It is this combination of celebration and secrecy that constitutes the main political effect of corporate concentration and control of media production.

However, there are further consequences for cultural politics stemming from the contemporary commodification of culture. In order

to understand properly these consequences, we need to clarify the present stage of industrial culture through an account of its historic development.

The Three Stages of Cultural Development

With the onset of industrial capitalist society in the 17th century, the traditional basis of cultural life in feudal political relations and an agrarian economy was gradually eroded. The formation of social identities revolved to an increasing extent around relationships stemming from industrial production. The *first* stage of industrial culture was *class culture* in which the class relations between workers and owners in the factory defined their sense of identity and place in the social world generally. Cultural expressions fit into this divided society through the separation between high culture and popular culture. The former centered on such institutions as concert halls, classical music, novels, and theater, while the latter revolved around taverns, folk music, pamphlets, and union meetings.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a dramatic increase in the concentration of capitalist ownership occurred. From being a system with a large number of separate owners competing for success in a predominantly competitive market, ownership was centralized in fewer and fewer hands and the market was increasingly dominated by large-scale producers. On this basis there was a "rationalization" of production through the meticulous analysis of the production process by time-and-motion studies and so forth. The old trades and their control over the manner of production were broken down and workers were confined to minutely specialized tasks. It was just another step to the assembly line, in which these tasks were performed by machines rather than workers, and the further development of automation.

Alongside this control of the production process, there was also increasing control of the market. In the first place, it was necessary to make sure that the great number of consumer goods produced by automated methods were bought by consumers. Second, it was necessary to ensure that the market became the major arena in which needs and desires aimed at satisfaction. Thus, ethnic, regional, and class allegiances — which aimed at particular and non-market means of satisfaction — were broken down in favor of homogeneous, market-oriented needs. Advertising was a key element in this transition. In the consumer society the main focus is on the realization of investment rather than its production.

From these changes, in the first two decades of this century,

emerges the *second* stage of industrial culture — *mass culture*. Culture becomes industrially produced for mass consumption. While there remain differential degrees of access to the goods of mass culture, this is not the same as the totally different spheres of cultural goods present in class culture. Mass culture is in principle available to all; the same type of goods are produced. The only differential is the relative amount of access groups and individuals have to the same sphere of goods. Thus mass culture levels the differences of class culture and projects a totally enclosing sphere in which homogeneous cultural expressions are produced and consumed as commodities. While class differences in production remain, social identity is formed primarily in consumption. Mass culture depends upon, but hides, its production process.

Since the 1960s there has been a further change in industrial culture. This is associated with the shift to a so-called “*information society*” and is part of a larger transition including the explosion of electronic media, the shift from print literacy to images, and the penetration of the commodity form throughout all cultural production. As in the previous two stages, a transition in production is also underway. Science and technology have become central productive forces so that goods are increasingly distanced from the human work that produces them. Industry has come upon ecological limits not only to capitalism but to industrial production itself. The concentration of ownership has now proceeded to such a vast extent that many transnational corporations are larger than national governments. This third stage of industrialism will require careful political-economic evaluation to assess the exact nature of the change underway. Our book, however, is focused on the cultural dimensions of this *third* stage.

Recent changes in the production and consumption of images have led many commentators to label contemporary society as *postmodern culture* — a society where social identity is formed through mass-mediated images and where culture and economy have merged to form a single sphere. It is a society and culture fundamentally different from the two earlier stages of industrial society and emerges on the basis of the two prior developments.

We suggest that the culture of the information age consists in the production of *staged difference*. Images are consumed as simulations of social identities. They no longer proceed through the homogenization of culture but rather through the simulation of differences overlaid on previous social homogenization. Thus, sex, race, ethnicity, as well as other differences, are no longer suppressed. They are simulated and floated as images in the social imagination. Social identities are constructed through the images on which the desire of audiences temporarily alights. Industrial culture now centers on a politics of images.

Violence, pornography, Reagan's TV politics, are just so many examples of the third stage of industrial culture. Thus the distinction between "images" and "real life," with which we began this introduction, can no longer be regarded as tenable. Social representations constitute social identities. The real is always mediated through images. It is this culture, and this politics, that is discussed under the heading of "postmodernism."

The postmodern stage of industrial culture has also given rise to the argument that we are entering an "information society." Many apologists for industrial capitalism (such as Daniel Bell, Alvin Toffler, and Marshall McLuhan) claim that the information society will remove the toils of industrial work, inequality on both national and international scales, and the separation between work and leisure. However, we may see in these claims merely a continuation of the ideological claims of mass culture: The supposed elimination of differentials stemming from the production process is really just a hiding of these inequalities behind the screen of consumed goods. Moreover, differentials in access to consumption remain. Both of these are issues of the distribution and exercise of social power. They will not disappear in the information age and need to be addressed by critical analysis.

We argue that the postmodern culture of staged difference is *overlaid* on the earlier phases of class culture and mass culture. Class relations in production and mass homogenization have not disappeared; they have simply ceased to be the central phenomenon through which the conjuncture of social relationships in contemporary society is articulated. This leads to a further point about the centrality of cultural dynamics in contemporary society. The dominant cultural articulation can proceed from any of a number of locations in the social body. The stages of industrial society involve just such shifts in the origin of cultural articulations. Culture, in this analysis, should not be thought of as totally dominated by and dependent upon the economic realm. It has to a large degree attained a measure of autonomy and also importance to the survival of the whole social realm. While we cannot say that power has shifted from Wall Street to Madison Avenue, we can say that the power of Wall Street is dependent upon the power of Madison Avenue for its realization and, therefore, the cultural dynamics of contemporary capitalism are not only significant in their own right, but also central to economic dynamics. Thus, cultural politics must address new sources of inequality in postmodern society. The question that poses itself is the extent to which these new conditions allow the possibility of an oppositional or progressive cultural politics.

Mainstream and Alternative Culture

Within the left, it has normally been assumed that mainstream culture offers no openings for a genuine alternative vision and that the creation of an *alternate* sphere is the best way for cultural politics to proceed. This is cultural politics based upon the “sixties” tradition of Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, the Weavers, Pete Seeger, and many more. These cultural productions draw on the folk traditions of black, ethnic, and regional music and crafts to articulate an independent version of events, but also and more importantly, of the framework within which events become meaningful and have significance. This is the politics of folk concerts, first-person documentaries, marches, demonstrations, teach-ins, etc. in which culture is created and maintained as an alternative political force. It is the cultural politics of Manhattan Cable’s “Paper Tiger” television, for example, where the ordinariness of handheld signs is celebrated as a triumph of authenticity over the technical wizardry that hides the inauthenticity of mainstream culture.²

Recently, a critique of this traditional notion of cultural politics has emerged. Jesse Lemisch argues that left culture has failed to engage the mainstream of American life and the vast bulk of the American people.

Why, at a time when so much avant-garde culture is crossing over toward a mainstream audience, does the left, with more important messages to convey, intentionally remain so isolated? What we have is a culture descended from a noble tradition of popular struggles — one whose public rehearsal is an important ritual of affirmation for those of us who grew up in it — that leaves us speaking a language that more and more Americans don’t understand.³

Lemisch claims that the left’s suspicious attitude toward slick, striking images and pure technique has doomed it to talk in old forms of communication that much of the audience simply finds dated and boring. It is a culture of isolationism where the “converted” reaffirm their conversation — a cultural practice that has abdicated the very cultural domain in which the vast majority of the audience participate in some form or another (even if it is a participation of passivity). Left culture, at its own peril, has refused to play the “numbers game.”

Such suspicion of the cultural forces of capitalism raises some interesting issues of what a future “socialist” culture might look like. Marx was clear that he regarded the development of material forces (separate from the relations of production under capitalism) as

progressive. Indeed, the socialist economy would be dependent upon the productive capacity unleashed by capitalist forms of production. The deeper question for us here is the extent to which the cultural forces of capitalism can be used to promote a more democratic and egalitarian society. Surely the perceived drabness of the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries cannot attract anyone's imagination. Lemisch urges the left to adopt the most advanced *forms* of communication of the contemporary marketplace to advance *left* content.

There are new ways of looking at the world, some from inside the left, some from outside. Say what we will about the values of television advertising and MTV, we recognize their form as distinctly contemporary, and so does much of America. They offer us rapid movement, mobile cameras, quick cutting, excitement, condensed expression, wit, comedy and attractive color. While I hold plenty of reservations about content, anyone who wants to talk to Americans — as the left presumably does — must understand this language.⁴

This critique of traditional left cultural strategies certainly hits at the core of the issues and raises some important questions. However, before we enthusiastically embrace the central tendencies of postmodern culture we need to consider some important reservations. First, what is the relationship of the world of images through which we hope to “speak” to Americans to an alternative political culture? The critique implies that left culture can be created through these images and is not dependent for its success upon the surrounding conditions of reception and experience. Lemisch mentions the “Sun City” video as an example of the success of this type of strategy. This video was produced by Artists United Against Apartheid in order to oppose the racist South African government. However, if the “Sun City” video was successful the real factor is its relationship to an existing and strong anti-apartheid movement in the United States such that the alternative images are both understood and appreciated by the audience. Could the MTV strategy work with an issue that does not already have a developed political base? As a counterexample, Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party of Britain in the election of 1987 put forward a superb media campaign that used the techniques of postmodern imagery but met with giant failure. The whole question of how the reception of this new proposed cultural object is affected by forces from *outside* the object itself remains to be answered.

Secondly, this approach does not investigate the affect of power on the form of culture. What is the effect of the production of culture as a commodity on the image-form? The separation of form and content that Lemisch's approach assumes may not be as simple as it appears.

What if the form affects the experience of the cultural product to such an extent that it alters the content? This, in short, is the “postmodern question.” In such a situation, the external context of reception takes on an even greater significance. The tendency of the contemporary commercial form of communication is toward a sequence of juxtaposed images without an explicit internal form of connection. This tendency has been led by ads, but is spreading throughout the media system. The production of cultural artifacts as commodities squeezes the maximum number of images into the shortest space of time — speedup in the entertainment industry — and, in so doing, pushes increasingly more of the context necessary for interpretation to the side of the audience (and away from its provision within the cultural object itself). This has been recognized by advertisers, who direct their messages at specific segments of the market, rather than at the audience as a whole. The representation of people in the ads as similar to the “type” advertisers want to buy the product indicates a recognition of the importance of a context of reception — though, of course, because of the speedup, this context is merely triggered and not developed.

In short, the argument that the left must abandon its traditional preference for small-scale, alternative, “folk” events makes far too many assumptions concerning the benign character of the packaging effect of mass media. First, it ignores the importance of a context of reception within which a message has meaning; and, second, it fails to investigate the connection between the commodity-form and the image-form.

The Possibilities of Intervention: Lennon and Springsteen

The issues that we have raised in the previous section can be concretized with specific reference to the two most important figures in mainstream culture, from a left perspective, in the last twenty years: John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen.

One reading of Springsteen is that he is a traditional lefty (with ties to the poor, unions, the unemployed, etc.) who despite his best intentions is misunderstood by his fans who do not recognize his political message. But Springsteen is much more ambiguous than this simple reading. The attempt by Ronald Reagan to appropriate “Born in the USA” as a campaign theme in 1984 was met by Springsteen with a kind of bemused bafflement rather than a clear refutation. In part, Springsteen could get away with not reacting because there was no pressure on him to clarify his position. Unlike the 1960s and the early 1970s, the political context did not force him to take sides. There was, in effect, “no pull from the