Deliberate Speed

THE ORIGINS
OF A
CULTURAL STYLE
IN THE
AMERICAN 1950s

Smithsonian Institution Press
Washington and London
For the memory
of my mother,

Dorothy Kearton Lhamon,
who fostered libraries
and worked for
civil rights,

AND

To Dan Lhamon
and Catherine Lhamon
State University for awarding me a summer writing grant. Thanks to
Studies in Popular Culture for permission to reincorporate here "Little Rich-
ard as a Folk Performer."

Thanks most of all to Fita for her congenial scrutiny and always being
there.

PREFACE

Style and decision quickened in American life during the 1950s. Citizens
put the Second World War behind them by tuning their daily practices to fit
the jumped pulse of information, manufacture, and Cold War competition.
Government, business, and education likewise strove to match the excite-
ments of electronic speed, face down nuclear anxiety, and incorporate
newly aggressive demands and examples from black and youth cultures.
Singly and collectively, people converted their crises to opportunities.

Deliberate Speed concerns this conversion, its existence and its meth-
ods. In governance and the arts, as well as in looser forms of work and play
during the fifties, there was a sometimes conscious, usually subliminal
attempt to catch, cash in, and affirm real chances. People were coming out
of hibernation, like Ralph Ellison’s invisible man at the end of his novel
(1952), to the feeling of “infinite possibilities” (435). They were using—and
enhancing in the use—a newly supportive body of lore. Although they
could hardly know it at the time, they were borne on a new lore cycle.

Deliberate Speed is about this concerted cultural cycle that was in place
by the mid-fifties and still continues. This cycle came into being to wrestle
the intense divisions troubling people at the time—the new cast of delin-
quency, the rights and suffrage struggles, the fears of communism and
radioactive fallout, the uprootings of career and postwar migration, and the
startling technologies spawning portable radios, televisions, and high-
fidelity record players. Across their chasms of regional, racial, class, gender,
and age differences, quite various groups were crafting quite similar prac-
The term indicated the ripeness of the moment. Had circumstances not been just the way they were, neither the phrase nor the style it epitomized would have prevailed. The end of the war, the lapse of European prestige, the technological revolution, the recognition of the baby boom, the extraordinary surge of black culture, a climate of improvisation in art and mores, the presence of courageous individuals to formulate, argue, and pursue policies, to compose and daily deepen artistic practice—these and more were necessary together.

Because it involves an oxymoron, the concept of deliberate speed was difficult for people to conceive, hard to hold together, and remains difficult to analyze. Just as ordinary living pushes people to one rate or the other, so writers and philosophers have promoted one or the other of its moods. Samuel Johnson favored the slow aspect when, in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), he prided himself on speaking "not dogmatically but deliberately." Charles Olson preferred the fast aspect when he declared, in "Projective Verse" (1950), "fast... there's the dogma." Institutions and cautious individuals associate with deliberation; rebels, impetuous lovers, and bebop musicians associate with speed. Fools rush in where justices fear to tread. Thus, when judges appeal to speed they do so in grave circumstances. In addition to the difficult bridge American justice obliged itself to construct therefore, the phrase "deliberate speed" indicates the alarm the Court felt in the middle of the fifties.

Well beyond the Supreme Court, significant moments of the fifties joined deliberation to speed. In each such nexus, both strands crossed and recrossed to knot together an apparently rickety web. In the sequences of Robert Frank's photographs, in Vladimir Nabokov's prose, in Thelonious Monk's music, in Chuck Berry's performances, in Jack Kerouac's prose, sketching, and in Martin Luther King's voice there is this yoking of opposites into the prevailing form of deliberate speed. Important to see is how these examples are how they meld their contrarities. They seem always on the verge of vibrating apart. Nevertheless, they continue to cohere because they grow out of a body of lore that agrees to understand its contributin elements as complementary. These yoked artifacts are *cultural objects*: Particular circumstances conspired to create and continue to acclaim them.

You might say that the contemporary period has earlier dates than *Deliberate Speed* identifies. You might argue that the fifties began in the late forties with the invention of the transistor, the marketing of the first television and tape recorders, with Jackson Pollock's first clutch of fun paintings, with Jack Kerouac's initial cross-country experiences. You might claim that the fifties began in 1940 when Hans Hofmann painte
Spring, probably the first avant-garde drip painting. You might say that as early as the twenties the Jazz Age anticipated what was important in the fifties by setting white feet dancing to black rhythms.

If you proposed those points, you would be more an ally than an opponent of the arguments of Deliberate Speed. But I would reply that the mid-fifties was when those separate ingredients, and many more, cooked down into a recognizable aesthetic. They became then a set of strategies for cultural action. The focus here is on the fifties, particularly the middle of that decade, because then all the elements of contemporary American culture were in the pot, swapping around, and affecting each other. My disagreement is with those sixties chauvinists who believe countercultures, radical artistic experimentation, and the civil rights movement all began under President Kennedy, with Woodstock, or because of some cosmic consciousness which the moon walk evoked. Not true—in the sixties and after, people ratified the insights of fifties cultural life, popularizing them into mass movements. Contemporary circumstances became conceptual as a usable present about 1955, not much sooner, not much later.

People did have early glimpses of speeding culture in the saxophone excitement of Lester Young and the tumultuous sentences of William Faulkner. They felt vernacular deliberation in the grainy dependencies of William Carlos Williams’s poems, the homegrown paintings and photographs of Charles Sheeler. But a form that sustained itself, that was both constant and constantly varied, that extended from the highest Court in Washington to the lowly Dew Drop Inn in New Orleans (where Little Richard surfaced with “Tutti Frutti”)—such a form took time to fashion, first, and discover, second.

If deliberate speed was to be found abroad in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as well as at home in Benoit Mandelbrot’s mathematics of Chaos, it would take time to foment and formulate. The horrors of the Second World War surely delayed and complicated this formation, as did the anxious readjustment to the shortages and intelligence migrations from Europe to America for ten years after the war. The very foraging among the separate ingredients of fifties life for the complements of a satisfying cultural gumbo itself took place with deliberate speed. The contemporary era could not begin immediately after V-day if only because no one invents a congenial lore overnight. It took ten years.

The eventual precipitate at the center of the fifties was culture strong and rich enough to nurture an era. It may not be “good to eat a thousand
MATERIAL DIFFERENCES

The usual theory about the 1950s is that the decade lacked serious culture. This curious judgment asks people to imagine they had no useful heritage to guide their choices. It contends gestures and actions had no useful context in the fifties, and that no fruitful echoes reassured men and women of their value. The consensus judgment is nonsense at the literal level, because every person has deeply etched structures of feeling to mold its actions and responses. And the consensus is possible to hold at the cultural level only by ignoring or repressing the pesky upstart practices of the era.

Because they diminish complexity, consensus agreements about an era are themselves serious problems. Like any other time, the decade of the fifties had many parts, all of them flowing, none of them dammed for long. The main current into the fifties was a relatively calm stream of canonical culture — tired of doctrinal struggle after the thirties, further exhausted in the rigor of war and its aftermath in the forties, but confident of its course. Yet the fifties were the years of the great expansion of mass and popular culture. This expansion pumped the calm flow that had entered the decade to flood heights by mid-decade. This cultural freshet whorled into side-streams, splashed into turbulent eddies, diverged into puddles. People previously excluded from cultural representation peered then into those diverted cultural reflectors and often enough found themselves imaged there, sometimes for the first time. Other people found clarifications of themselves quite different from their mainstream interpretations. The side-streams provided supportive, shifting, complex pictures of people's lives.

Although many or most of those reflections have been lost, finally
times during and continually after it. It has become as much an association
of the fifties as pastel coffee tables with wire legs, domed toasters, and the
wonder of white wobble bread. It is as fetishized as a Maidenform ad, as
constant in discussion of the period as a Zippo cigarette lighter. At the end
of the forties, observers agree, the lines of cultural development were clear,
canonical, and content. As the fifties came on, culture turned out the lights,
settled into its deep torpor, and woke up when a windblown Robert Frost
recited "The Gift Outright" at the Kennedy inaugural in 1961. The sixties
seemed all the more stunning because the hole-in-history consensus en-
couraged people to misunderstand how those crucible years had forged the
succeeding decades.

How then did this conventional idea of the fifties arise and survive? It
served a trade-off purpose. If there was no serious culture, if balm was
everywhere in the land, if everyman might happily oscillate between job
and hearth, then Americans had successfully turned the corner from the
discipline, privations, and social commitment of the war. This agreement,
and its survival as a convention, shows how narrowly shrunken was the
documented domain at the end of the modern era. The agreement’s ethno-
centrism left out the grass roots organizing and culture of black people, for
instance, as well as the segregation that set them in motion. The agree-
ment’s certainty of superiority inhibited its seeking out or understanding
the quality in popular culture. As a convention, its autonomous momentum
rolled right past the bases for contemporary culture; it excluded and
ignored the budding rock ‘n’ roll, fiction, poetry, sculpture, photography,
jazz, and cinema extant at the time. The trade-off was that ignoring and
suppressing these pests prolonged the calm contentment of the national
host.

When in the early sixties the host culture began to notice that a
threatening, difficult culture had been growing under its feet, then would-
be sympathizers were at a loss to explain it. Because they, too, had sub-
scribed to the convention that the fifties were a cultural vacuum, these
liberals tried to blame the vacuum on the resentments of cultural Yahoos.
Murray Kempton wrote this wrinkle on the conventional idea of the
previous decade in his New York Post column (13 November 1962). The
“fifties were not the Eisenhower years but the Nixon years,” said Kempton:
“That was the decade when the American lower middle class in the person
of [Nixon] moved to engrave into the history of the United States, as the
voice of America, its own faltering spirit, its self-pity and its envy, its
continual anxiety about what the wrong people might think, its whole
peevious, resentful whine. The Nixon years belonged to all the young men

This consensual hole-in-history is itself an artifact imposed on the

some of them are being saved—as with the reissuing of rhythm ‘n’ blues and
rockabilly disks in formats finely enough presented that auditors can
decode them. Researchers are turning up old issues of small-circulation
magazines with remarkable constellations of talent—like New World Writ-
ing, no. 7 (1953). In this seventh issue appeared the first excerpts of both Jack
Kerouac’s On the Road and Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, a sampling of then-new
English poets that included Thom Gunn and A. Alvarez, a short story by
Evelyn Thompson Riesman, and a review by Donald Hall of “The New
Poetry” that called attention not only to Robert Lowell and Theodore
Roethke, but also to Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Bishop. Hall finished his
piece—and his words were the last of the issue—wondering if “we are only
at the beginning, and not at the end, of a poetic golden age” (247).

Donald Hall’s wonder at beginnings and endings in the middle of the
fifties aptly answers the consensual agreement that there was no culture in
the decade. As the price of democracy is eternal vigilance, so the cost of
vital culture is its continual re-creation. People never find out who they are,
or their value, by looking into someone else’s mirror, nor by accepting
cultural judgments from an earlier time. Those reflections are necessary
correctives. They guide people toward goals and around pitfalls. But a
living culture constantly adapts the usable past to present pressures. Not
the other way around. When critics measure the present only with past
yardsticks, or when they fail to search widely enough for an era’s authentic
gestures, then it appears to them that no usable present culture exists.

Concerning the fifties, participant observers made both mistakes. The
early critics during the decade generally judged it by the past. Later critics
generally refused to see the value in their midst. If they were trying to be
sympathetic, appraisers argued that Americans were recoiling from the
stress of war when they opted to conceive families and careers rather than
new artifacts. According to this apparently sympathetic excuse, American
achievement in the fifties was political and social, not cultural. Americans
survived and beat back Senator McCarthy with his lists of communists in
high places. They survived but sustained the Cold War. They encouraged
their President’s golf game and forgave his spy planes over Russia. They
fought more or less willingly in Korea. They chuckled at the sounds of
Beatnik bongos syncopating poetry in the San Franciscan night. They
smiled at teenagers revving hot rods over the babble of their car radios. All
this, and much more, was quaint and sometimes interesting, but it pro-
duced no symphony, no cathedral, no Moby Dick. Intellectual convention
has it that the fifties amounted to a hole in cultural history.

This consensual hole-in-history is itself an artifact imposed on the
who had been to the schools which instructed them that they could not be too careful."

How miraculous the surprises of the sixties must have seemed to people who believed the fifties consensus. The aggressive movements for social justice, the new literary styles and forms of painting, the surprising music of rock 'n' roll and reinvigorated jazz syntheses, the multiple excitements of popular culture, the bottom-up political action to muzzle American imperialism—all these phenomena surely seemed a series of immaculate conceptions arising from the orthodox understanding of the fifties. Caught as they were in the consensus agreement, it was inconceivable to contemporary observers that there might have been vitality where they assumed a vacuum.

If the conventional view were a simple misunderstanding set straight in the best cultural accounts, this historical hole would not be so alarming. Most of the best books dig the hole deeper, however, confirming and causing the popular view. Histories such as Godfrey Hodgson's America in Our Time celebrate the Kennedy Camelot years and regret those which came before and after. William Manchester's history terms the mid-fifties the "Eisenhower Siesta" (772). Tony Tanner's otherwise thorough study, City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970, in fact tilts sharply toward the sixties. And, until David Garfield's A Player's Place (1980), no book dealt with the evolution of American method acting—which, after all, greatly altered theater and film in the postwar period. Not until Taylor Branch's Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63, did the sifted-out political movements begin to receive their due. Nor has the nostalgic haze which the popular media lavished on the fifties helped people notice and understand the significant forces already coalescing in those days. From TV's Dick Clark revivals and reruns of the Fonz to the lists of fifties pleasantries that newspapers continue to publish, the media reinforce the consensus vacuum.

What has always attracted everyone's attention, then as now, was the baby boom growing adolescent and spending its pocket money. The youth domain, that most seething area of fifties culture, was so visible to orthodox critics, in fact, that their labeling placements of it are still influential. Early critics divided adolescent behavior of the fifties into delinquency or apathy, or, as Benjamin DeMott was still lecturing in 1962, "corner boys" and "college boys." By this illusory division pundits severed experience from its expression and set up their own aghast wonder when it turned out, in the sixties, that the two poles were not asunder. The Beatles and Rolling Stones and SDS and the activists of Mississippi Freedom Summer—all these varying types voiced corner experiences in vivid ways that made college men and women attend passionately. As always, the actual people, the actual times, clamber out of the cubbyholes in which observers place them.

By not seeing how the decade's differences were setting new standards and adding up to a new paradigm, even well-wishing commentators contributed to the idea of the hole in the fifties. The hole has as little connection to what really happened then as did Ozzie and Harriet. In fact, the fifties were alive with vital art, new codes of behavior, and strong patterns of shape and energy that still survive without conventional acclaim. Films and novels and paintings and songs had to stand on their own. Their composers had to clarify to themselves what their aims were, at least question their own biases, because the popular view, liberal through conservative, correctly states how chilly was the Cold War climate. Those years did not spoil art. The consequence was a period with an uncommonly high proportion of embattled and daring works. It is odd to think of Robert Rauschenberg assemblages, the apparently haphazard sequences of Robert Frank's photos, or the verbose improvisations of Jack Kerouac as pared down, fit for a fight, and aggressive. But they were fit because of the hostility they faced at conception and during their nurture. Their makers had each shed from their deliberately speeding artifacts as many inherited assumptions as they could. Instead, these artists consciously indulged oppositional ideas.

The indulgence was expensive. Even established writers had difficulty publishing their new work. After his well-received first novel, The Town and the City (1950), Jack Kerouac accumulated fourteen separate book manuscripts in his duffel before Viking finally realized there were profits to reap from vagabond romance and published in 1957 his now-famous six-year-old roll of typescript, On the Road. From among those fourteen titles would come at least three important volumes: On the Road, an iconographic celebration of consuming energy on vanishing two-lane blacktops; Dr. Sax, in which Kerouac does for a child's vision of good and evil what Joyce did for Molly Bloom's; and Visions of Cody, Kerouac's wedding of America's experimental prose tradition with the outcast exuberances of male bonding and popular culture. Neither could Vladimir Nabokov find a publisher in the United States for his novel, Lolita, so it appeared first in Paris in 1955 with the green leather binding of a pornographic publishing house, before coming home to controversy and ultimate acclaim in 1958.

Norman Mailer has similarly written of his agony while placing and reworking Deer Park, the 1955 novel in which he forged his stylistic sig-
nature. Already acclaimed as the best writer of his generation, Mailer was trying to slough off the naturalism that linked him to Dreiser and Dos Passos. But because they liked the link which Mailer wished to renounce, the first seven houses that read his novel turned it down. Significantly, it was Walter Minton, the same editor who welcomed home *Lolita* three years later, who finally took *Deer Park* at G. P. Putnam's Sons. When Putnam's accepted his typescript, Mailer rewrote it yet again. Somehow calling up remarkable confidence, he ultimately achieved his new antic style that undercut the bureaucratese and authoritarian spirit then blacklistng the Hollywood he took as his topic. He has embellished such gestures since 1955, often falling into self-parody, but the elements were all fixed then, during the struggle with *Deer Park*.

Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the first excerpts of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (appearing as "Catch-18" and "Jazz of the Beat Generation"), Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and much more originated in 1955. It is, however, not so much the literary surge of the fifties that is important by itself. Rather, what is important is that the same telling denominators that ran through books also ran through politics and everything else that was cultural. Even authors who hardly classify as political in any usual sense—Flannery O'Connor being one and Chuck Berry another—wrote about disenfranchised, displaced, and thus disordered people struggling to fix or simply understand their own place in a hostile or indifferent context. The quality uniting so many of these apparently disparate and subsequently important works is that they were born fighting the forces ignoring and suppressing them. And most important: insofar as art can win anything, this insurgent culture won. Its styles, attitudes, and icons more deeply shaped the styles, attitudes, and art of subsequent decades than have other fifties strains, or even the Cold War authorities themselves.

Despite the orthodox hole in history, the fifties were less than the Nixon and McCarthy years, less the years of the whining, lower-middle class, than they were the years of deliberate speed. They were the years when a new cultural style rose from practices people were using to encompass experiences that felt new. Their moves were more complex and unruly than either Joe McCarthy or Richard Nixon could hope to govern—as each discovered, sooner and later. It was a widespread culture establishing the era's eventual strategies because many separate cables in American life and art, high through low, kinked together, displayed a unified sensitivity and intent, and expressed a congenial awareness of their shared possibilities and impediments.

Here, then, is an orienting glimpse at chief characteristics of the sudden bend culture and life took together at mid-decade.

Without denying or forgetting their recent agonies, Americans were distinctly more optimistic following World War II, after taking a decade to think it all over, than during the wallows of despair that followed the trench warfare of the first war and the dislocation of the Depression. In spite of the overwhelming impact of Belsen and Nagasaki, and their warning demonstration of human capacity—mass genocide and world incineration—contemporary American culture has tried to find alternatives rather than bewail the obvious. It has tried therefore to escape the modern feeling of confinement, of complete determination, which Jean-Paul Sartre's title *No Exit* so succinctly epitomized. Indeed, many of the central contemporary artifacts—*Catch-22*, Elvis Presley's "Mystery Train," Robert Rauschenberg's combine paintings, for instance—are about this process of finding new ways to overcome despair, reassembling old feelings in new ways so to feel possibility again in the world. These examples provide images also of rapidity, which was doubtless both tied up with the feeling of the fifties and one of its primary behests to contemporary life.

After 1955, the culture became demonstrably speedier in style, delivery, and cycles because it was inevitably starting to represent the megapolitan, geographic, and demographic development of the postwar period. Each of the several reasons for the new deliberate speed in culture is deeply connected to the illusion of what came to be known as "post-scarcity state" energy and the arrogance of its consumption. The implicit aesthetic of a deliberately speedy style matches the consumer economics of the period.

In literary work, as in postwar life, new accents and dialects proliferated. Women, ethnic minorities, and Western and Southern voices capitalized on the beachheads Katherine Anne Porter, Langston Hughes, and William Faulkner had established in the previous generation. This expanded sociology evident in literature was part of a larger awareness of voices and forms in general—"new journalism," Ed Murrow's burrowing documentaries, theme parks such as the newly opened Disneyland, the music of rock 'n roll, and the mass civil rights movement.

In the fifties occurred a major welling up of confessional and personal expression. Improvisation and emotional volatility became hallmarks of culture from song and poetry to painting and theater. Perhaps the urge to turn oneself inside out on the couch, page, and stage has been an attempt to
colonize interior space to avoid the invasive sensory overload which elec-
tronic culture amplified on the outside. Perhaps the increasing urgency of
personal details was an intuitive assertion of private parts against the public
facelessness of a mass society. In any case, artists as disparate as the
philosopher Herbert Marcuse and Leroy Griffin of the Nutmegs, a New
Haven rhythm 'n' blues quintet, were saying respectively in 1955 that it was
a political act simply for a person "to be for himself," and "deep in my heart,
there's a story untold."

Culture tilted toward youth. The magnitude and staying power of the
youth culture was of course not evident at first but gradually its scope and
longevity both proved that the existence of rock films and music, of
Bildungroman and denim dishabille were not simply a case of relaxed
ambitions on the part of artists, nor only of young faces and expressions,
nor of producers flogging unrelated fads—as its critics have variously
insisted. So many people, so many films, novels, plays, movies, ministers,
mayors, and mothers were angry at the manners and values of the youth
culture that for a while it seemed the ideal of Eternal Youth was the most
obsessively threatening theme of our time. Clearly this perceived threat
militated against calm appraisal. Otherwise, critics would have seen that
a culture living under the fear of nuclear annihilation could be expected to
fetishize cartoons of vitality. A consumer society without precedent could
be expected to celebrate among its members those with the readiest energy
for fulfilling its values. After all, much of the art made in service of the
youth culture was promising and vital by anyone's standards—Catch-22, for
example, and Little Richard's songs.

In short, there were structural reasons, material differences, that ex-
plained the existence of a youth culture (and the civil rights movement, and
the culture of deliberate speed in general). It was foolish then—and ir-
responsible today—not to search out those reasons, to attack Elvis for his
pelvis, Little Richard for his frenzy, Kerouac for his dislocations, without
looking at the mutually generating matrix of their effects. Not that any of
its opponents slowed down the youth culture, however. Neither the ethical
tone of complaint about his songs, nor filming Elvis only above the belt (as
Ed Sullivan did), hindered the impact of rock 'n' roll. So totally did youth
culture come to integrate itself into contemporary consciousness that
citizens now rarely even notice its presence. Taking occupation of the land,
youth culture became largely the main culture; it became the atmosphere of
American life.

That atmosphere is charged, and wanton squandering of energy—in
decibels, pace, and unstable motion—always accompanies it. The best
artists, of course, realized that unregulated energy, like any explosion, soon
expends itself. After the orgiastic jazz descriptions and the stoned cross-
county car rides in On the Road, Kerouac delivered both his most re-
monstrative and unremembered prose. In Part Four of the novel, Sal
describes how he and Dean drove south among the Mexican Indians, who
held "forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer,
and they never dreamed the sadness and the poor broken delusion of it.
They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges
and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they
someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way" (246). In a
few short years, youth culture became a complete idea of a culture, know-
ing its beginning, projecting its end, and believing it would choose when
that time came whether to explode or consume itself. Jack Kerouac did
both, but the youth culture really did neither. It has just lived on and on.
Like the English rock group, the Who, the youth culture hoped it would die
before it grew old. But it has not yet learned how to die.

After a muted moment between the two world wars, the classic
American theme of male bonding, which Walt Whitman called "fervent
comradeship," again found its voices. Along with Huck and Jim, Ishmael
and Queequeg, Uncle Remus and the blond boy on his knee, now appeared
Leslie Fiedler's provocative mid-fifties account of these literary instances
(“Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!”). And there were also
instances simultaneous with his account that he did not remark: Dean and
Sal on the road, Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady and Carl Solomon
howling, Skipper and Brick outside Maggie's hot tin roof, Marty and
Angie on TV, Yossarian rushing off to join Orr in Sweden, Elvis and the
Guys tamped in pink Cadillacs and sleeping on each other's shoulders as
they sped to the next town where they would fondle those long guitar
necks and incite more frenzy.

Folk or oral culture completed its changes during the fifties to popular
or mediated culture. Long produced anonymously at the local level,
folklore had been collected in urban centers. People make popular culture in
urban centers, however, and distribute it to the local level, where it usually
dissipates uncollected. This was an important reversal of cultural vector.
Lore, which previous generations had absorbed at Grandpa's or Uncle
Remus's knee or on the store porch, was now absorbed basking in the blue
glow of the TV, from the car radio, from comics and theme parks. Instead
of producing and participating in their own lore, fifties people began
buying it ready-made, became its recipients. Since lore is a substratum of
culture—one resource from which all art is created—this basic change in
lore's nature deeply affected, and sometimes seemed to threaten, the creation of art in the postfifties epoch. One of the most substantial achievements of the early contemporary era was the quiet working out of a new recognition of its own lore.

Around 1955, American culture rapidly moved toward promiscuity, of which the sexual dimension is only the most obvious. The word's pro-mix etymology refers to a tendency to blend surprising forms, which is precisely what one finds everywhere on the current cultural scene. "Queen for a Day" began on TV in 1955, taking viewers into the tabloid lives of others every afternoon. Rock 'n' roll is a promiscuous mix of previously discrete musics made by whites and blacks. In the mid-fifties, Miles Davis, Art Blakey, and Cannonball Adderley began playing soul music which fused the previously exclusive strands of bop and cool jazz. Most of the exciting literature of the decade refueled by looking outside literary tradition for new paradigms. Painting, sculpture, and dance also searched beyond the parameters of their own respective autonomous. The attempted reassembly of culture from the scrambled refuse of the old order is what observers witnessed in the fifties. Thomas Pynchon, in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), stated this idea most succinctly: "Somewhere, among the wastes of the World, is the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (385).

Postwar changes in material caused the elaboration of all the electric musics (from rock to synthesizer appendages on the classical tradition), the new format of radio, and the new documentary. In the more numerous and elusive cases of the tilt toward youth, speedy style, male bonding, multiplying accents and forms, these new material differences "fixed"—in the sense of *taped, recorded, caught*—and thus amplified extant impulses or trends that had not found their happiest medium until the fifties. These amplified trends became the strategies that have unified first American—then much of Western—culture since.

Countering the conventional consensus about the vacancy of the fifties, deliberately speeding culture caught on not only in America, but also abroad. The sense of a new epoch or cultural generation cropped up in the developed industrial economies of Europe, in Japan, even in Russia, as each sought its next stage. Angry young men were seizing London stages while New Wave films were flooding Paris. But the seizing and flooding erupted about a year earlier, and were both more widespread and consolidated, in the United States, where conditions created a rich medium for the new strategies. America did most of the hybridizing, then exported the seeds for sowing across both the Atlantic and Pacific.

American fifties culture developed in struggle against the McCarthyite xenophobia, against the increasing institutionalization of life outside traditional family structures, and against the postwar anxieties and ambitions that clamped down on its energies. But such a psychological and political explanation—although necessary—remains insufficient to explain the magnitude of its growth.

All history (not least American) indicates a push and pull for control. Histories of the arts, of the individual's personality, or of the state's domains all show a struggle for control of their field. Indeed, although there are intrinsic reasons for a topic's importance, its historical impact always adds a measure of interest. Did X win? Did X control its field? Did X change the direction of the field's development? For instance, Marcel Duchamp, Mar Ray, and Francis Picabia—each of them European—during the halcyon days of New York Dada in the teen years of this century, anticipated almost all the activities of fifties youth. They proposed urinals as sculpted fountains, shaved their hair into stubby stars, and issued at least as many manifestos as any of the fifties avant garde. Duchamp's readymades and Man Ray's photograph of Duchamp's haircut are neither benchmarks of sublimity nor manifestly beautiful in their complexity. Their importance hangs instead on the bravado by which they shocked and shifted the autonomy of the art world, primarily, for they initially altered public taste hardly at all. Their beauty has been a function of their historical potency. A such, however, Dada and its successive Surrealism remained minorit phenomena. They were interesting in themselves and in the ideas spinin off them. The widest significance of Dada and Surrealism, however, was to seed the main crops that grew as their progeny—rock 'n' roll, Pop an Abstract Expressionist art, confessional literature. There they had the widest effects, wildly altering public aesthetics. Dada grew out of soci cultural rebellion, influenced subsequent art, but remained large and unable to change life as most people lived it—until the 1950s. Until the fifties, Dada was not a mass movement. Only then did many people see Dada's fruits. How did that happen?

A major difference between the versions of youth, black, women's, avant-garde cultures at the beginning of the century and then at the midd of the century is that new broadcasting methods coincided with the mid-century versions. That shocking growth of a new culture in the mid-fiftiies is explicable only in the observation that material differences during the e
swelled the cultural momentum well beyond individual genius and psychopolitical resistance.

The consumer electronic revolution caused the most significant changes in the way culture has felt during the postwar period. American industry introduced three major new appliances in the late forties and set them in American living rooms by the mid-fifties: tape recorders, hi-fidelity systems based on the long-playing record, and television. Moreover, the process of miniaturization, which transistors spawned, hastened the consumer end of this revolution. Transistors made both new and old appliances cheap, convenient, and portable. Furthermore, one leading recording tape manufacturer advertised stereo tapes available to the American public for the first time in 1955. By 1958, when stereo records were generally available, the movement to stereo was firmly entrenched (Gellat 38-15). There would be no turning back of the electronic clock. From the living room, electronics spread to the bedroom, to the car, and on to the beach, to the jogger and bicyclist.

Much of this new technology derived from war-stimulated research, originally and in subsequent advances. During the Second World War, Germans developed the tape recorder especially to broadcast propaganda. It became available to the Allies only when they captured German equipment (along with rockets) in 1945. The tape recorder, first for audio then for visual playback, has gradually increased in importance ever since and in many ways now supersedes record players as a consumer convenience.

The tape recorder’s earlier, pre-consumer, role was also significant. It enabled the documentation of diverse folk styles, thus giving access (among much else) to more models from which Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard might soon synthesize their new music. And when that time came, from 1954 through about 1956, provincial taping capacities helped preserve rock’s local, largely sunbelt sound. The tape recorder thus helped break down the concentration of culture production in its established locations. Finally, as time passed and sophistication increased, the recorder encouraged the manipulation, distortion, and processing of sound that are diagnostic in the current music industry.

Also a product of this era is the 33 1/3-rpm long-playing record (LP), which Columbia Records introduced only in 1948, at the same time RCA provided the 45-rpm “single.” Both these intended to supplant the 78-rpm recordings of the time, and, after a while, they did. (78s held on, though, until 1959 in the black rhythm ’n’ blues market.) It was not at first clear that there was a place for both formats, however, and the so-called Battle of the Speeds began. Not until the mid-fifties did the outcome become evident: the LP was the device for longer programs and anthologies, Beethoven’s symphonies, and Chuck Berry’s greatest hits (including “Roll Over, Beethoven”); the single was for individual pop songs; and the 78 “sides” withered away, like rulers no longer needed. Once that battle resolved into a complementary relationship, then the technology was ready to market the new miscegenated music of rock ’n’ roll that the tape recorder (plus many factors beyond technology) had permitted. When rock then traveled north from southern cities in 1955, the record industry suddenly scored a $277 million market, $205 million of which was for LPs. So large was this increased market that RCA, then the other major labels, dropped the cost of an LP by as much as 40 percent (Chapple and Garofalo, and Newsweek, 11/10/55).

The same year Columbia introduced the LP in 1948, three scientists working in the Bell Lab invented the transistor. John Bardeen, Walter H. Brittain, and William B. Shockley, who together received the Nobel Prize for physics in 1956, thus started the necessary process of miniaturization that allowed hoisting computers into outer space and propelling ethnic voices into America’s most private inner spaces. Lagging only seven years after the transistor’s invention, Philco introduced the world’s first transistorized, battery-powered phonograph, weighing in at seven pounds, for 45-rpm singles only, and costing some $60. And Raytheon introduced an all-transistor portable radio, claiming it cut “battery costs from ‘dollars to dimes’” (Newsweek, 5/23/55).

This making-small of electronic appliances vastly changed the way people experienced life, from toys to defense, Simon to Sidewinder, toddler to pensioner. Integrated into aerospace, defense, and education, as well as into its initially intended communications, the transistor and then the microchip quickened the demographic flow from the Northeast to the South and Southwest, where the new jobs were. Indeed, the Sunbelt and so-called cowboy culture derive from the postwar invention, population shift, new industry, consumer culture cluster of change—which was all falling in place by the mid-fifties.

This southwestern migration of money, professionals, and entrepreneurs reversed the earlier migrations to northern cities which the South had suffered between the two wars. Between 1945 and 1975, the southern half of the country “underwent the most massive population expansion in history from about forty million people to nearly eighty million people in just three decades, giving the area... a population greater than all but seven foreign countries” (Sale 18). Moreover, with the new arrivals came can-do technique, risk capital, and Northern racial attitudes. The integration of the
and appliance registration. Thus, the U.S. eagerly grasped TV’s advertising potential while Europe (and Asia) feared its power of political propaganda. This fundamental difference indicates not only postwar Europe’s understandable wariness of ideological amplification, but also partially explains the way America leapfrogged her parent nations into a consumer culture.

By the middle of the fifties, when England’s first independent network (ITV) began tentative broadcasting, the U.S. pattern of deluging the airwaves with snowy, fleeting visions of consumer goods was not only rampant and secure, but ideologically conscious. No one needed to wait for Marshall McLuhan’s sixties edicts for an adequate analysis. The essential details were extant a decade earlier, evident in the Art Directors Club Annual 34 for 1955. In the introduction to their anthology of award-winning graphics, these commercial artists knew all about the “transition from word thinking to visual thinking,” recognized the epoch as a “period of technical development unprecedented in history,” claimed that such technology not only allowed but forced “publication for the fast, comprehensive communication of ideas,” and linked it all to the business of creating consumption. Already in the fifties, that part of McLuhan’s theory which has not since become risible—books are dead, for example—was simply working knowledge for the layout trade. They must have wondered what the hullabaloo over McLuhan was all about.

The same Art Directors Club Annual 34 cited a Young & Rubicam ad for P&G, “Answer to Automation,” which congratulated advertising for solving all of America’s problems, helping “American business move all the goods automation can turn out—and have people asking for more.” The anonymous commentator for the Art Directors Club then continued in that marvelous entre nous tone so revealing in hindsight, “In the new impersonal mass selling era, the burden to manufacture customers will not be limited to...the actual point where a product is sold” (Section Five). American TV, this ad crowed, could now “manufacture customers” in their own living rooms. Advertising saw itself as a full partner in the burgeoning new economy. People had begun being advertising’s raw material and consumers were already advertising’s finished product. Only advertising could create the hype and need to consume that was an absolutely necessary part of the rapidly expanding economy. As advertising’s speediest and most-dimensional force, TV became advertising’s chief tool for the processing of people into consumers.

Leisure was what Americans suddenly had plenty to consume. Aly Toffler reports in The Third Wave that during the decade beginning in 1950, there came to be in the United States—for the first time in history, an
where—more white-collar than blue-collar workers, more middle- than working-class people. Despite Toffler’s breathless optimism about the shift, clearly a white collar does not a manager make, nor middle-class attire provide middle-class power. Expanding white-collar employment was cosmetic. It did not address basic powerlessness any more than did the ability to buy goods previously out of reach. Although the attire and affluence helped compensate the continued impotence, their hollowness also sped the cycle of consumption still inflating the economy today. In 1955, however, the syndrome of people spending more than they earned was a fresh enough horror to be news. Here was the burgeoning of the installment plan. In the year’s first half, millions of American families “borrowed” half a million dollars a month to pay for new cars and appliances on the installment plan. They borrowed a billion dollars a month for new homes. For six consecutive months the consumer debt of the United States reached an all-time high” (Hansen 11–12).

The middle of the fifties was when it became clear that the problem of production, at least in the United States, was yielding to the problem of consumption. Consumption of leisure, consumption of goods, consumption of all the planned and unplanned pollutants that came with charge-account prosperity and manufactured consumers and visual thinking: all these proved that problems accompanied possibilities. Few people were prepared for either. Most people muddled through at first, looking for ways to cope with the tangible differences in their lives. Their deliberately speeding culture was how Americans accommodated themselves in the fifties to their new world.

While deliberately speeding culture helped some citizens, it angered others. Much of the speed, style, slapdash improvisation, and rushing instability in poems, songs, films, and fiction offended keepers of maturing traditions. These characteristics were adjustments artists made to altered material conditions. Many times, however, the offense or delight people took from fifties art was due to changes larger than stylistic adjustments. People in the fifties were facing changes in the structural vectors of society. And their art showed it. As the industrial economy became postindustrial after the war and the modern prudential ethic modulated into a contemporary consumer creed, so were there corresponding changes in directions characters moved in stories.

During the heyday of the industrial economy in the first half of this century, for instance, modern American novelists celebrated people dying to build and impose designs. Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths, Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen, and Hemingway’s Robert Jordan all die in would-be heroic efforts to stencil the world with their plans. Quentin Anderson has termed such characters “imperial selves.” The tragedy for these industrial heroes is their failure to stencil their will lastingly on the world. Their imperial wills fail. But that day is past. During the postindustrial economy of the century’s second half, fictional characters in novel after novel have died taking it all in, speeding on the road, incorporating inanimate matter, enjoying and ingesting their options. The problem now is to deal with this barrage of possibility.

Modern heroes died trying to produce. Contemporary protagonists live and sometimes die trying to consume. Who in serious Western fiction dies of overwork anymore, even in these latter days of workaholics? If the term tragedy still has contemporary meaning it is attached to Allen Ginsberg’s narrator in “Howl” looking for his “angry fix.” Contemporary tragedy is in Flannery O’Connor’s Tarwater, in Pynchon’s Victoria Wren, in Mailer’s Stephen Rojack, in Heller’s Bob Slocum, in Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty, in DeLillo’s Jack Gladney—postindustrial characters who flounder and fail trying to consume the plethoric possibilities jamming them all. Such characters indicate gross changes in American culture from before and after the middle of the twentieth century. Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita is an apt example, worth pausing over.

Lolita is a twelve-year-old “nymphet” when fortyish Humbert Humbert first sees her lolling on her mother’s patio. He rents a room in her house, eventually marrying the mother in order to steal the daughter’s surreptitious squeezes and sneak his own unilateral orgasms. However, Lolita’s tastes are less for this ex-French teacher, this bundle of European partis pris and psychoses, than for the immediate gratification she permits. “She it was,” Humbert says, “to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every poster” (136). The girl ultimately escapes, like some of the Little Red Riding Hoods before her, this wolf in her way. What particularly finishes Lolita is that she strays off the path not into the forest but onto the fast lane. Used up by the time she is seventeen, dead in frontier childbirth before she is eighteen, Lolita’s life coincides with the fulcrum years of the country’s tip from pre- to full-consumption economy, late forties to mid-fifties, about which Nabokov is carefully precise.

Humbert’s pursuit of Lolita is at the beginning of the consumer electronic revolution. He pursues her at the moment of the marketing of
TV and tape recorders and the invention of the transistor. Such hardware and its new popular culture, with their attendant icons and dalliances and possibilities, and began to encourage substantial deviation from traditional Euroculture. The inchoate American pop world is what separates Lolita from Humbert; Lolita's pop world allows her indifference. Those "luminous globules of gonadal glow that travel up the opalescent sides of jukeboxes" (124) in America—that's the incessant competition which ultimately beats Humbert at his gamining. "To the wonderland I had to offer," he laments, "my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge" (152).

In short, Lolita prefers the fast-food hamburger to Humbert's "Hamburger" (152): and that is precisely the material difference the novel importantly recorded. Popular culture was there with enough presence, now, to set America off. The year Lolita appeared in Paris, 1955, was the year McDonald's raised its golden arches in America, the year Playboy first printed nude photos.

When not even many American intellectuals saw they had their own independent culture, when it was still (or again) commonplace to insist that America had no usable past, 8 no tradition of her own, no sense of an independent being, Nabokov demurred. He played his hand when he showed Humbert Humbert overestimating Lolita's dependency. That is, Humbert Humbert clearly tried to colonize Lolita. But, at novel's end, when Humbert remembers an overheard remark Lolita delivered to one of her friends, then Nabokov displayed his private sense of American independence:

"I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind [said Humbert] and... behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me." (259)

In plain words, Lolita and the innocent America for which she stands have their own cultures "absolutely forbidden" even to the loving voyeur. Correct in this insight, Nabokov was among the first to put it so articulately.

He was hardly alone, however. Artists in nearly every American form were making quite similar statements. Ralph Ellison, for instance, was describing the independent strength of black lore even transplanted, especially transplanted, to the cities. Elia Kazan and Nicholas Ray and Lee Strasberg were putting such an American spin to method acting that audiences now associated it more with Broadway and Hollywood than

with the Moscow Art Theater and Constantin Stanislavski, its actual originator. American painting was by now in its second generation of independence and leadership. Improvisational art from jazz to poetry was flowering in New York and San Francisco as it had not often done since the coming of the Gutenberg galaxy. To have this independent art, Americans had had to discover their separation from dependency on earlier traditions.

In The Americans, Robert Frank recorded the precise moment of Americans discovering their difference: acknowledging and finding the means to step away from their colonized selves. 9 It is the moment that Nabokov and company rendered. Over and over, the participants in Frank's photos gesture in at least one of two ways. They put their hands to their faces in vernacular versions of "The Thinker." And they look away, memorializing moments which, according to Jack Kerouac talking about an outtake from this series, showed "man recognizing his own mind's essence, no matter what." 10 In both signals, their real gaze is inward, often with their eyes closed in public. These seeming signature gestures characterize not Frank's work as a whole, but this volume, these subjects at this time, ordinary citizens of the mid-fifties. They are a striking confirmation of provincials acknowledging the onset of their capital consciousness, for they enact it. And men like Frank and Nabokov—women like O'Connor and, later, Sontag—were there to fix the images. These were differences of consciousness that had material effects.

Matériel affecting consciousness might be the real contemplation of The Americans, On the Road, Lolita, Chuck Berry's songs, and, among many others from mid-decade, Agee's A Death in the Family. These works all have an elegiac cast to them in their attitude toward old ways, particularly about the road as they sense it becoming the superhighway, not to mention the Interstate, for which until 1968 there was no name. 11 These books, songs, films, and plays also puzzle over the new electronics, worrying about the differences they will make, as in Frank's images of television sets blabbing to blank cafes and studios, and jukeboxes gathering their environs round them at least as authoritatively as any Wallace Stevens jar taking dominion in Tennessee. In his stage directions for Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Tennessee Williams bulks up this presence of media appliances:

Against the wall space between the two huge double doors upstairs: a monumental monstrosity peculiar to our times, a huge console combination of radio-phonograph (Hi-Fi with three speakers) TV set and liquor cabinet... all in one piece... This piece of furniture (?!), this monument, is a very complete and compact little shrine to
virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide from such things as the characters in the play are faced with. (xiv)

This anxiety about the new media which writers felt in the fifties was real but predictable. Modern writers in the twenties and thirties had feared film in the same way. Cecilia Brady in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (published posthumously, 1941) opened her story of Hollywood in the early thirties with memories of how much her English teachers at Bennington College had "really hated" Hollywood "way down deep as a threat to their existence." (3) Perhaps the new media are in every epoch convenient whipping boys for associated clusters of problems. Or, the media make opportunities. Whichever view observers take, the media of the fifties amounted to a large portion of the new culture's material differences.

Beyond all that it did to create new customers for business, TV's penetration into American life coincided with surprising prosperity. At $375 billion, the GNP in the first half of 1955 reached higher than any such period ever before in war or peace and up $10 billion over the most closely competitive period, in 1953. Americans were spending $25 billion a year for recreation, up $750 million over 1954, and another $5 billion for meals and beverages outside the home, up $3 billion from the previous year. These figures underscore *Lolita*'s indication that all was not well with families in Babylon. Parents were spending much money to enforce the home as the center of leisure, but much money was also financing flight from the family. This tension, so to and fro the family, already pronounced in 1955 statistics, is confirmed in and confirms the songs and novels of the time. It grew only tenser as the decade passed, in the art as well as in the material statistics.

The fast-food industry, the new TV dinners that appeared at mid-decade, the realization that the TV was a useful babysitter—these all testify that the culture was adjusting to the burgeoning but then still unacknowledged women's movement. Employment shortages during the war had drawn women from the distaff domain to the factory and office, establishing a pattern that continues still, a pattern that contributes its bit to the expanding possibilities of postwar life. A growing economy, better roads and cars, mushrooming advertising, a culture starting to service youth needs in addition to adult needs—all these directly or indirectly squeezed attachments to the family. It wasn't just Junior, but also Mother and Father, who were feeling tugged away from the conventional home, even while other aspects of the culture pulled home toward the family hearth. It is as if the fifties family were taffy. "Father Knows Best," "Captain Kangaroo," "Wyatt Earp," "Gunsmoke," "Peter Pan" (TV's first spectacular

in 1955, starring Mary Martin), and Disney's "Davy Crockett" were all affirming family images inherited from the Victorians, setting up strong father figures, even while admitting between the blips that some children did not want to grow up or that they wanted their own worlds, as in both "Peter Pan" and the new "Mickey Mouse Club." In general, TV tried to solidify family images while films, fiction, poetry, and plays documented the family's beleaguerment and disintegration. This was the tension that James Dean and Marlon Brando rode to prominence, that Sylvia Plath would record in such poems as "Tulips" (which describe husband and children as "little smiling hooks"), and make James Agee's *A Death in the Family* so poignant. It was clear that there were many positions to stake out on the baby boom. It was clear, moreover, that the baby boom had grown into a lucrative target market and that business had anticipated that market.

The onset of consumer electronics vastly altered competing media such as print and the older electric forms of radio and cinema. Despite the famous McLuhanesque predictions, however, people have not stopped reading, not listening to radio, not viewing films. To the contrary, sturdy statistics indicate a higher proportion of readers, listeners, and viewers now than ever before, but by mid-decade they were attending to different art and attending to it differently (Dempsey 23). Literacy did not suffer. Rather, new sorts of verbal entertainments opened up new markets challenging the high literacy of elite readers whom the publishing industry had pampered—and who had controlled the calm flow of canonical culture as it entered the decade, before the flood of popular culture. Such elite readers confused the passing of their privilege with the passing of literacy itself.

Verbal complexity is what literacy protects and projects, encodes and enshrines. By that definition, literacy spread and increased during the fifties. New levels of verbal energy—much of its complexity still unplumbed thirty years later—emerged on record and in film, as the instances of Little Richard and other performers in the blues tradition show. Television and hi-fi spread the cultural franchise much more widely through the population. At the same time and as a partial consequence, new money, new classes, and insurgent ethnicities injected their needs into the programming mix. Always looking for new markets, the disseminators of culture from record companies to TV studios to paperback publishers could and did supply these differently refined tastes all across the Southern Rim, and elsewhere. These new groups demanded, and received, their artful justification—from Eudora Welty and James Agee and James Baldwin, Elvis Presley and Cannonball Adderley and Ray Charles, as well as "Gunsmoke"
and "Davy Crockett"—just as all classes that ever before rose to prominence demanded and received from their arts similar assurances.

The combined forms of electronic home entertainment forced cinemas to close by the hundreds in the fifties and reduced the number of feature films Hollywood distributed in 1962 to a mere 38 percent of the number distributed in 1949. Delmore Schwartz pointed out early what is now the cliché: "the owner of a TV set has the greatest of all cathedrals of the motion picture right in his own living room." That is why Hollywood and TV were then, he said in 1955, in "a state which can only be called acutely transitional. This is also true of TV as a whole and of the entire entertainment industry since the new medium may dominate or devour all the older forms" (21). Dominant, TV has done, devour, it has not. But Schwartz’s writer’s anxiety stamped itself on the succeeding era anyway.

In his book, Television, Raymond Williams has coined a more accurate, if more awkward, term for this cultural difference TV made. Williams calls it the increasing "mobile privatization" of the West. As the media became more and more massively centralized, some consumers diluted that condition, or countered its feel, by receiving it not in mass arenas such as the previous era’s film palaces, but in the privacy of their homes or cars. Indeed, one of the more interesting forms fifties culture patronized—especially because it melded together both mass and private experience—was the drive-in movie: all through the decade the great bulk of newly built cinemas were drive-ins. People were part of a mass culture at the drive-in. But they had a metal cocoon protecting their vulnerable individuality; and they had mobile potential, too. The driver of the car could always cut out of the mass. Ultimately, cutting out has been more important than driving in: the drive-ins are all gone now, but for a few fossils, and the cocoon is everywhere more mobile in the omnipresent Walkman and its many progeny, such as the wrist TV and the ever-thinner portable compact disc player.

When this urge to privatization began, the bourgeoisie of the fifties emulated the princes and princesses of yore much more than they imitated the middle class between the wars. The modern middle class liked to promenade in public and attended the theater to see and display. The Sunbelt middle class, beginning in the fifties, used the new media as switched-on, robotized court jesters, which they enjoyed in the privacy of their own formica mead halls, now called rumpus rooms, with their feet up and shirts open, banquets laid before them in individual aluminum trays, brew and snacks as handy as at King Arthur’s round table. With the lights low and the blue glow up, even a tract home may seem a castle.

This quirk of history had gone so far by the mid-fifties that the studio system in Hollywood had developed Cinerama, Superscope ("the new anamorphic process of the giant wide screen"), CinemaScope, Todd-aq, Aromarama, Smell-O-Vision, 3-D, and other spectacular scams—among them Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and all their clones—to lure viewers back from the private, small, blue screen to the public, even wider, silver screen. At the same time, however, Hollywood also experimented briefly with the opposite tack. Such films as Stanley Kubrick’s much-underrated The Killer’s Kiss (1955), Richard Brooks’s Blackboard Jungle (1955), Nicholas Ray’s Rebel without a Cause (1955), as well as Elia Kazan’s various films with Marlon Brando and James Dean from 1950 to 1955 demonstrated a refreshing independence. Each was willing if not eager to forego the mass audience for smaller, more fragmented, embattled, and alienated audiences than the prewar and pre-TV Hollywood had habitually courted.

Until TV atomized the film’s appeal, there had been no financial need—or chance—to make such films. Likewise, in subsequent decades it was interestingly true that the citizenry pursued with almost equal frenzy both the mass society and its shards. Along with the growth of arena rock, for instance, came the simultaneous proliferation of bands clearly aimed at a minority taste, and independent labels to promulgate them. For example, one listened to the group Stiff Little Fingers on the Rigid Digit label.

Finding strategies to cope with consumer electronics united all the branches of culture in the sixties. As Hollywood explored new structural responses to the wired home, so radio, literature, foreign films, painting, and jazz all experimented creatively with style. After TV pinched radio’s narrative content—stole the quiz shows, sitcoms, soap operas, horse operas, grand operas, grand ole opry, even the news—radio was briefly a void, but only briefly. In desperation, it turned to the previously denigrated content of black music, in the form of rhythm ‘n’ blues and the very new rock ‘n’ roll, and to the jive patter of blacktalk which young, white deejays absorbed imitating older, black voice artists. One favorite among the older originals was Baltimore’s Fat Daddy, whose midnight sign-off had become legendary by the beginning of the sixties, and went something like this: "Great kooka looga mooga (BONG!), this is yo’ Fat, Fat Daddy (BONG) walkin’ the backstreets of B-town (BONG) like a fat, fat sparrow (BONG!) alone with the bells (BONG!) of Bald-mer, sayin’ a fat, fat (BONG!) good night to you."

Radio’s changes illustrate the bends taken in all the media and arts. Each followed a progression understandable as the principle of passé pursuit: each medium and each art most fulfills its potential the moment after it loses its mass audience and faces its apparent obsolescence.
Just as wholly new styles and directions in poetry and fiction, painting and jazz arose in the fifties in competition with the newly rewired home, so did wholly new radio chains spring up based on rock, ding-a-ling news flashes, the Top 40 format, and the slipping-sliding patter of the Fat Daddies, Rockin' Robins, Jumpin' Georges, Moondog Alans, and Wolfman Jacks spread across the land like so much peanut butter. This change at first was the intuitive response of local programmers struggling to fill the void caused when TV wrecked radio's network programming. If new formulae swept into the gap almost immediately—as with the Top 40 programming that Todd Storz's New Orleans-based chain first established in 1955—at least this new pattern began as a real response to audience behavior (Gellatt 306). Originally, the impulse for the formula was bottom-up, not top-down. Having noticed that youths gathering around jukeboxes played their favorite songs over and over, rather than stressing variety, Storz had his stations mimic teen behavior. The Storz chain began playing popular songs as often as forty times a day. But this imitation soon became dictation of audience taste. Moreover, the repetition speeded up exhaustion of a song's popularity, providing the station with the powerful burden of supplying new alternatives faster and faster.

Because radio responded creatively to its threatened obsolescence, more radios were operating in 1955 than ever before—111 million. Sales of the appliances were up 40 percent over the year before, and the total number of stations had doubled since 1947. Forced to reinvent its content after pessimists tolled its death knell, radio flourished as never before, fulfilling a potential it never suspected. Unlike old soldiers, old media do not fade away. Rather, they grow more vital in passé pursuit. They stop seeking the majority audience, formulate instead a minority aesthetic, and please fewer people more thoroughly.

During a period of passé pursuit, each medium pares down to what its controllers consider its unique strength. Hollywood film typically chose spectacles, as it is still doing today, stressing its gigantism and its capacity to bring off special effects. Radio emphasized its fleeting instability and, with its black and youth idioms, its very minority status. Painters redoubled efforts during this period to approach pure process: the action of painter confronting and covering virgin canvas. That's why Harold Rosenberg's term “action painting” came to apply generically to all the various competing painting cults in the postwar period, from abstract expressionism through combine paintings to subway-car graffiti. During passé pursuit, a medium streamlines itself, ups the beat and pace. Hence, bop double-timed swing, rock double-timed rhythm 'n' blues, and punk double-timed rock.


Passé pursuit in the fifties also illustrates recognition of new paradigms to pursue. The speed and staccato format in each of the consumer electronic media was a new model of energy's regulation and play. Beat poetry and the prose of Kerouac, Mailer, and Pynchon all emulated the new form of the era—momentous spasms of energy frequently linked together amorphously. Electronics had programmed the audience to attend in concentrated spans with heavy doses of information sandwiched between relaxed lapses. If contemporary artists were to claim attention from the audience they shared willy-nilly with the electronic media, artists would have to participate in the electronic parameters. They did: Joseph Heller's chapters grew as brief as the gap between television commercials; Robert Rauschenberg recycled newspaper images and automobile detritus into his assemblages; Robert Frank snatched photos of mostly Southern Rim subjects from his moving car window. That's one way art has always rejuvenated itself—by discovering new potential in new material relations.

The largest difference that the new material conditions made in contemporary culture, thus also in contemporary life, was the speeding up of cultura cycles. The new technology made information available so much faster that audiences could develop and exhaust forms as they had always done, but at an unprecedented speed. This speed meant that the old process of European validation of American popular art could occur more quickly. Kerouac's image of the road returned to these shores in Peter Handke's Austrian novel, Short Letter, Long Farewell and in the German Wim Wender's film King of the Road. Nabokov excited loving attention to American motels and gas stations. French critics celebrated "hot jazz" and film noir. English youth permitted polite Americans to reattend to rhythm 'n' blues after the musi of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones redeployed its vitality. All this happened quickly beginning in the fifties and is still continuing. The development cycles of fiction, jazz, film, and rock 'n' roll all stepped up.

Accompanying this redeployment came an emphasis on repetition probably because electronics and plastics encouraged it even more than mechanical, industrial methods had in the century's first half. Everywhere one looks at mid-century, there was the same emphasis on replication, o
control or manipulation or processing of surfaces (as in smooth, bright, and shiny plastic or chrome or Naugahyde). People wanted and designers stressed inheritance of familiar forms from popular culture (targets, flags, tires, detective formulae, blues lyrics, sexual clichés, and folklore). And people used those gives to serve certain common themes and forms. The aerodynamic sweep showed up everywhere, from auto fins and chrome, to coffee tables and couches, from ashtrays to jewelry to Steuben glass sculpture, and then became the registered trademark of a running shoe. It celebrated speed, it signified motion and the pleasure of plastic freedom.

The repetition of shapes and insignia and disparate themes in the decade had many implications. Initially it solicited the new syntheses necessary as the decade deepened because it allowed people to identify with and declare positions previously unavailable to them. Teenagers wearing coonskin caps in Syracuse, and craving Tex-Mex Fritos packaged in Dallas, might accompany their mother or older sibling to the supermarket, riding in Detroit's tail-finned Impala and listening to Macon's Little Richard sing a song with a New Orleans arrangement on Los Angeles's Specialty Records label. Such multiple juxtapositions, commonplace today, were still surprising then. They quickly stitched the crazy quilt of signs now charismatic in contemporary American life. The ease and frequent emptiness of the combinations contributed to their rapid consumption, so that Americans gobbled styles and information, form and knowledge, like they burned petrol, pushed back the night with neon and searchlights, smoked cigarettes, and swilled cola: ever more, ever faster.

Whether in abusing material resources or instigating thoughtful plans for urban redevelopment, social integration, and a steady-state economy, opportunities in the fifties ensured also the danger of new vulgarities. If an item could be replicated so easily, some said and continue to say, it must be cheap. If it becomes a best-seller, if it is popular, it must be worthless. So goes this plausible line. But does the democratization of culture and education really cheapen it? Or does it dilute its exclusivity, diminish its privilege?

The life of an idea or synthesized shape is much shorter now not only or simply because heavy-handed people have thumbed it but also because so many more hands—deft and sensitive ones, too—have kneaded and needed and used it up. Many more people attending to a form or an idea simply exploit all its possibilities, see through what it can do, much more rapidly than just a third of a century ago.

Compare the history of the novel to that of rock 'n' roll. Both started out a minority taste, became a mass taste, and then splintered into several subgenres. Both have been the typical cultural expressions of classes and epochs. Both started out aggressively fighting for their share of attention, novels attacking the drama, the tract, and the poem, rock attacking jazz and pop and rolling over classical music.

The novel in English was at first the scrappy street prose of the cony catcher and the parading of Aphra Behn fantasies. Then, with Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, through Charles Dickens and George Eliot, it became the proud voice of the middle class. When that class splintered, as reported in fictions by Henry James and Edith Wharton and Mark Twain, as confirmed in Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf, and as reinforced in Thomas Pynchon and Susan Sontag—and not incidentally when the media started to proliferate into film and radio and large circulation magazines—then the novel itself splintered. The novel fell back to servicing distinct minority tastes, from challenging consciousness extenders to formulaic revolving-rack anodynes. Now the novel is another of the varieties of print, small stuff compared to the clout of the electric media in all its immediate power. This rise and fall of the novel took just over three centuries.

The rise and fall of rock 'n' roll took just over three decades. From its minority start in the South in the early fifties, through its renaissance in the mouths of English imitators in the early sixties, through the second renaissance in California in 1967, through its mass acceptance and incorporation into college classes in the seventies, rock 'n' roll ran through its rapid ascendancy. Its severe splintering also began in the seventies, if not before, with punk and postpunk and new wave groups. This period of fall was really its period of passé pursuit, reflecting rock's reserving of the minority tastes it had increasingly neglected while it was growing into a majority art form.

□ □ □ □ □

There can be no doubting the way the era's technological changes quickened the development of every one of its forms. Genres, forms, and idea constellations in this time have taken on a deliberate speed, circling faster than anyone was accustomed to seeing them come and go. Rather than exhausting the stock of available ideas, however, the contemporary hand on access to information has replenished and augmented it even while leveling the value of some privileged positions. When people could not produce an idea or a form inexpensively, people did. More and more, they toyed with more readily available ideas, shapes, and bits of informatic
than they ever could before the material differences of the fifties yielded such ready access. And they continue to jigsaw startling recombinations that further contribute to the stock in a larger jigsaw possibility. As it continues, this rate will seem more and more quaint like the rates of the past, like the gait of a horse and buggy, like the pace of a Model T, like the once blinding but now grinding 4.77 MHz clockspeed of the original personal computers.

What is striking, and the subject of Deliberate Speed, is that every cultural bailiwick in our time looks over its shoulder, alarmed in one way or another, to its own crawling buggy past. In painting, sculpture, jazz, rock 'n' roll, drama, fiction, poetry, film, and architecture there was in the mid-fifties a shift in both the velocity and vector of development, a kinking of each form's cable. This bend in every art's history is interesting by itself, providing many local examples, but the collective kinking of all the cultural forms together, more or less at once, has made the large difference that preoccupies Deliberate Speed.

Far from there being no culture in the fifties, or its being the whining sound of lower-class resentment, the truth is that conditions in the fifties produced an aggressive and whole culture which was distinct from its predecessor and is not yet replaced. All the elements of American contemporary culture were in place by the year 1955, when the civil rights movement began, when the TV takeover had reached the majority of the nation's homes, when rock 'n' roll surfaced, when the consumer society and its energy problems were as visible as the fallout and bomb shelters beginning to obsess American citizens, and when the baby boom's outsiders started coming into their own. No wonder the sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer confirmed that year a "decisive shift in the American mind" (48). It was neither good nor bad, this mind's gearshift into deliberate speed. It was what beleaguered people could fashion to encompass their materially different experience.

To decide without much search that there was no important culture in the fifties, or that the genuine voice to be heard then was Nixon's whine, is to misunderstand the resilient nature of human culture in overcoming adversity. Indeed, a considerable part of fifties culture takes that point as its topic, emphasizing its resolute, dialectical relationship to the mainstream. From Brando's omni-rebellion to Jasper Johns's ironic flattening and palimpsesting of the flag, from Martin Luther King's bus boycott to Little Richard's sexual rebellion in "Tutti Frutti," from Neal Cassady's stimulated daze to Gary Snyder's Zen ways, fifties culture was an oppositional culture. It was quite clearly and quite often about the need to have an effect, about overcoming malaise, affectlessness, anomic, impotence—about overcoming the whole laundry list of accusations that the period's armchair commentators liked to toss its way. If there really was apathy in a significant part of the population after the war, the cultural record shows there were busy hives counteracting it well before the frenetic and supposedly uniquely active sixties.

The most important poems composed at mid-decade, for instance, doubtless include two by Allen Ginsberg, "Howl" and "America." He begins the first poem acknowledging his victimization. The best minds of his generation have been "destroyed by madness." They search "negro streets" for answers. He concludes the second poem overcoming this alienation. Converting his adversity into play, he promises his country in public to put his "queer shoulder to the wheel" (Collected Poems 148). Acknowledging and forefronting one's difference is the leitmotif of the art that came to counter the whine. The culture of deliberate speed, Ginsberg wrote in "Howl,"

rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an e1 l1 lamma lamma sabachthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio. (line 77)

In using Christ's last words on the cross (translated at Matthew 27:46 as "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"). Ginsberg has slightly respelled and doubled the King James version's "lama." Stuttering the question anthemically, Ginsberg blows it through a saxophone to shive: his existing cities as Joshua did Jericho. Importantly, however, this time around there will be amplification sufficient to shiver all the cities because poets will use the media. Ginsberg's appropriation of Matthew further indicates this extraordinary ambition of both the poet and the audience which accepted his lines as a creed. When Ginsberg located the famous Christian wail within the shadow of jazz storming social walls he made a imaginative gesture that would be iconic for deliberately speeding culture. His twisting, ecletic confidence documented, too, that culture's contemptory synthesis. He radically yoked aggressive Judeo-Christian myth with Afro-American expression.

Rather than ignoring or renouncing tradition, as many critics originally claimed, this deliberately speeding culture recharged tradition for its own uses. Ginsberg reimagined the wail of abandoned Christianity at rescuscitated it into a battle cry against victimization. When he yoked th
rebirth with the consumer electronics revolution (radio) and black culture (jazz), he put explicit alliances—indeed, the principle of alliance—at the heart of the aesthetic he delivered. Like the deliberately speeding culture which it helped inaugurate and for which it can stand, “Howl” filled any purported fifties hole in history.

Charlie Parker, the great saxophone player and bop jazz improver, died laughing on 12 March 1955. Ill, propped on pillows in the suite of Barone Panmonica de Koenigswarter at the Hotel Stanhope in New York City, laughing at a vaudeville juggling act on the Dorsey Brothers’ TV show, Parker choked, then succumbed to a seizure. Although he was only thirty-four years old that spring, his attending physician estimated the age fifty-five, for Parker had paced his life at the tempo he spurted concepts of innovation through his alto. Within days, all over New York but especially in its subways and alleys, the legend appeared spontaneously: “Bird Live.

Charlie “Yardbird” Parker had joined the rare line of black cultural characteristics who were adopted by segments of both black and white culture. Parker’s music epitomized the newly emerging culture of deliberate speed.

All his discipline was devoted to intensity. One first heard his speed and nimble chaos, the sound of someone extraordinarily attentive to the present moment. Then the structure supporting the music’s surface of combobulations gradually appeared. Finally one realized the moving, even mortal—risks Parker took circumventing limits others accepted. The progressive understanding of Parker’s dimensions shows well in a comparison of two successive responses by two admiring writers. In 1952, Kerouac defined bop as that music which surrounds its subject “indirectly and too late but completely from every angle except the angle we all didn’t know” (Visions of Cody 296). Twenty-one years later, Thomas Pynchon would remember hearing just that mortal angle nobody can verify. Parker’s music: “down inside his most affirmative solos honks already