

The 1960s from Real to Reel

Cultural R/Evolution and Moving Image in Film and Television

The importance of media to the cultural-political explosion of the 1960s is difficult to overstate. The moving image, in particular, holds a central position not only as a site of cultural praxis where the rebellion was enacted, but in the politics of cultural memory through which the upheaval of the decade is processed. One broad set of interpretations of the 1960s has emphasized the role of explicit political activity carried out by student and subcultural radicals inspired by Marxism, anarchism, and the liberation movements of the Third World. Another has focused on the role played by broad-based, cross-generational cultural change at the level of sexual mores, fashion, access to consumer goods, and so on. In both interpretations, media have been central, but more so in the latter, if only because of the key role of television and film in popularizing changing mores. The tension between these two interpretive poles has an obvious political valence. Were the 1960s revolutionary or merely evolutionary? And, if the latter, what does that render of the claims and aims of 1960s radicals?

The question here, among other things, is one of agency. To what extent was the upheaval of the 1960s a matter of events driven by actors hoping to challenge the status quo, as opposed to an ultimately depoliticized cultural insurgency elaborated along the sleek hyper-modernist surfaces of consumer capitalism? As with most interpretive dialectics, the synthesis quickly suggests itself. Obviously the rebellion of the 1960s derived its cumulative power from the convergence of these disparate strands of cultural-political radicalism, rather than solely from one or the other. From this perspective, the field of culture—from mass-produced popular culture to various forms of underground culture spanning radical youth tribes to the avant-garde in the arts—represented a continuum in which dif-

ferent phenomena mutually influenced each other, as well as the political rebellion with which they were, sometimes nominally, often explicitly, connected.

If one theme or question emerges from the essays in this issue, it is about the status of popular culture as a field for the creation, elaboration, and consumption of the 1960s cultural revolution. Cultural production was a key site of activism in the 1960s, to be sure, but even in the (nominally more passive) realm of consumption, the cultural was imbued with potentially emancipatory content. As we know from Cultural and Media Studies, consumer choices in fashion, music, film, and so on are far from unpolitical. Yet the question remains of the *extent* to which the creation and consumption of popular culture could ultimately function as a form of political resistance. Each of the essays in this issue, in their own way, comes to grips with this conundrum.

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Wheeler Winston Dixon's essay, "The End of the Real: 1960s Experimental Cinema, and The Loss of Cinema Culture," calls to mind the now (in some cases, literally) lost world of 1960s independent filmmaking, a world in which the notion of making art outside of normal channels of production and distribution was understood by its protagonists as its own form of radical praxis. It is difficult

to call to mind now, in an era of almost unlimited access to the cultural means of production—no further away than one's laptop—the radical imperative at work in the artistic initiatives Dixon examines. Against the backdrop of our current and seemingly endless horizon of digital possibility, the technical inaccessibility of this earlier wave of underground art reads as particularly ironic.

David E. James's essay, "Generic Variations In The Post-Classic Musical: *Lady Sings the Blues*," depicts film sitting astride a fissure separating two cultural-productive regimes: on one side, art as the province of moguls and Svengalis; on the other, art as the project of artists imbued with an imputed cultural authenticity. The 1960s—above all in the world of popular music—saw the passage from one to the other. In "abandon[ing] the 1960's model of music as spontaneous self-expression and revert[ing], if allegorically, to the 1950's model, established in *Rock Around the Clock*, of the priority of the manager and by implication of popular music as an industrially manufactured commodity," *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972) calls attention to how deeply popular music was imbedded in capitalism. This was the case both before and after the 1960s sea change.

Film's power to give shape to, and help foster, changing mores is the subject of Emma Pett's essay, "Breaking the Rules: Fashion and Film in 'Swinging Britain.'" Filmic depictions of "Swinging London" "articulated [a] sense of longing," she shows, both before and after the fact, introducing a note of emancipation in otherwise more-or-less conventional lives. Film viewership, she argues, in facilitating the "appropriati[on] [of] a range of different fashions," could thereby facilitate a sort of "cultural resistance." This resistance could not, however, be separated from the acts of consumption with which it was fundamentally associated. Fashion's "ideological role," thus, was ambiguous.

The figure of Theodor Adorno looms over such sites of ambiguity. Against Adorno, who argued that popular and mass culture debased the intellect and prevented authentic resistance to capitalism, decades of thinkers have argued the reverse, that popular culture presents manifold sites of resistance. Yet, as Andrew Marzoni shows in his essay "Sympathy for the Dialectic: Godard's *One Plus One* and the Battle of the Brows," popular music—here as instrumentalized in Godard's *One Plus One* (1968)—offered no simple binary between resistance or capitulation, but a series of negotiated meanings and loose semiotic ends. Centred on the Rolling Stones' recording of the

song "Sympathy for the Devil," Godard's film depicts a "conflict between different media and traditions of high and low [that] only become... more complex as the film progresses." It is characteristic that neither the Beatles nor the Stones, as Marzoni shows, trusted the French filmmaker's attempt to integrate music and politics via film. Interesting here is the revolutionary valence attached to the Rolling Stones, and more generally to rock music as a new cultural form that seemed to capture, and offer a vehicle for the politics of the 1960s youth rebellion. Except in a few celebrated cases, the revolutionary charge of music in the 1960s came more from the side of the audience than from that of the musicians. This bears not just on the gap between artistic intentions (like those of the filmmaker Godard) and artistic reception, but again, on the extent to which the popular arts—broadly defined here to include both rock music and avant-garde film—have political-emancipatory potential.

This question is operative in a double sense, for it bears both on the 1960s moment, and on its memorialization, the latter even more heavily mediated than the original. In her essay about the recently-concluded hit television series *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015), "Mad Men and Images of Women: Imitation, Nostalgia, and Consumerism," Victoria Kennedy shows that memorialization, in its least critical form—nostalgia—has the power not only to recall the political-cultural dilemmas of the past, but also to recapitulate or even erase them. On the one hand, she examines how the show handles images of women, commenting on the real social inequities women faced during the show's time period while simultaneously positing a stereotypical and disempowering binary model of womanhood. On the other hand, she shows how product lines designed to capitalize on the nostalgia evoked by the show—*Mad Men* clothing, cosmetics, and dolls—emphasize the latter at the expense of the former. This copy of a copy of a copy, she suggests, represents a straining out of the truth present in the show's depiction of the 1960s, leaving behind a nostalgic restoration of regressive gender relations that the show (in part) critiques. It is interesting to reflect here, in thinking about the dilemma that Kennedy identifies, how much the consumeristic memorialization happening *now* echoes the way in which consumer choice buttressed the formation of identity *then*. The disjuncture between ideas and their surfaces is present wherever the two are—together—for sale. In this way, the themes of these essays on film and television in or about the 1960s are the themes of our own moment, as well.