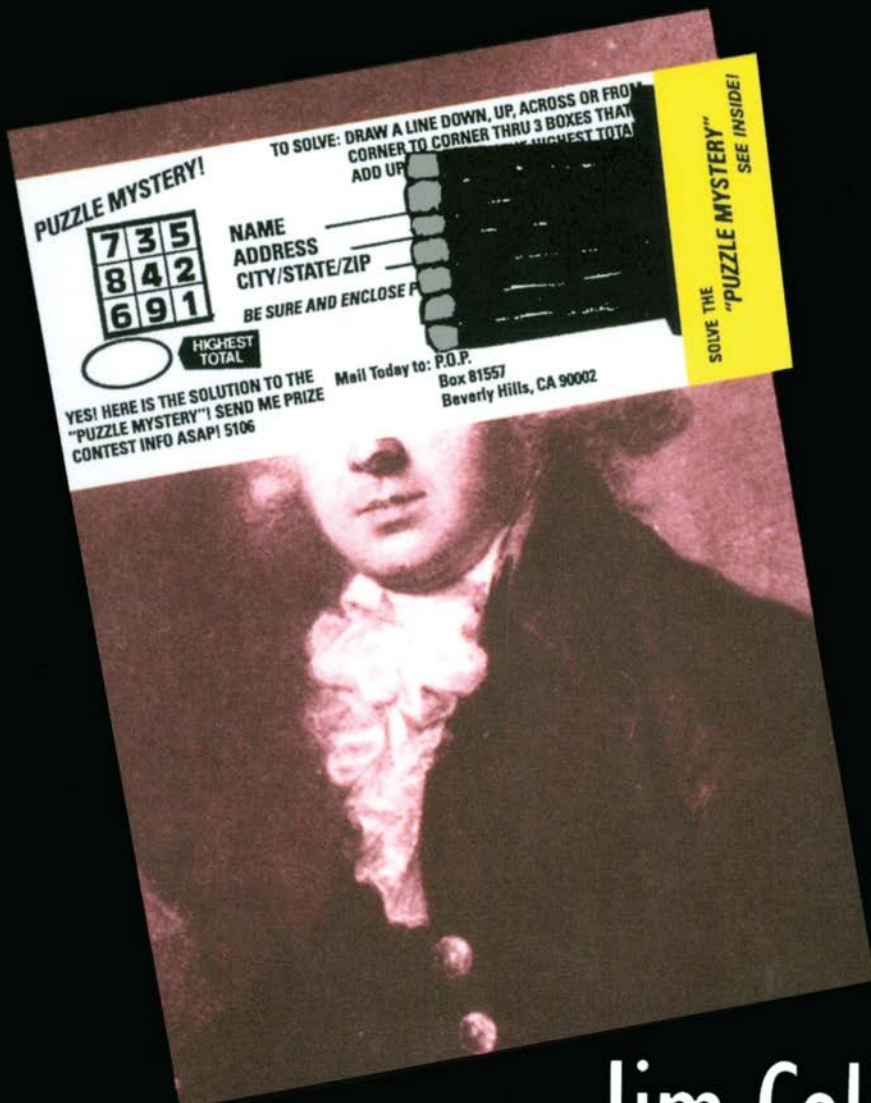


Uncommon Cultures

Popular Culture and Post-Modernism



Jim Collins

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Once upon a time there were the mass media and they were wicked, of course and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives for those who were not prisoners of the mass media. Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

Umberto Eco
Travels in Hyperreality
1986

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For Ava

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Finally, I owe everything to my wife, Ava, who has been the virtual co-creator of this book. She remains my severest critic and the light of my life.

Preface

I believe that any book with a title as enigmatic as mine should begin with a brief explanation that will give readers some idea of its contents. This of course tends to kill the suspense, but since the two subjects of this study—popular culture and Post-Modernism—have each generated numerous debates, the partisans of various sides might appreciate a brief description of what this book sets out to do. Stated as simply as possible, this study emphasizes the interconnectedness of popular culture and Post-Modernism; developing a coherent theory of the latter depends on our understanding the complexity and historical development of the former. It is of course no secret that Post-Modern texts in a number of different media have appropriated conventions and images normally associated with popular culture. I am concerned less with the actual appropriations as with the factors that have given rise to this process. Post-Modernism is most productively understood not just as a transitional reaction against Modernism, but as the culmination of the ongoing proliferation of popular narrative that began nearly two centuries ago. We need to see popular culture and Post-Modernism as a continuum because both reflect and produce the same cultural perspective—that “culture” no longer can be conceived as a Grand Hotel, as a totalizable system that somehow orchestrates all cultural production and reception according to one master system. Both insist, implicitly or explicitly, that what we consider “our culture” has become *discourse-sensitive*, that how we conceptualize that culture depends upon discourses which construct it in conflicting, often contradictory ways, according to interests and values of those discourses as they struggle to legitimize themselves as privileged forms of representation. The goal of this book is to come to terms with the “uncommonness” of contemporary cultures, to investigate how these decentering and recentering processes occur and to explore their ramifications for notions of textuality, intertextuality, audience, ideology and the history of narrative.

As the opening epigraph from Umberto Eco suggests, we do indeed need to start again and question many of the presuppositions that have served as the foundation for cultural analysis for the past three decades. This process of re-examination has already been initiated within the past few years by feminists and British culturalists anxious to demonstrate that “mass culture” is far from monolithic, particularly in regard to audiences and the various ways they give meaning to the texts that surround them. This book, then, is an attempt to bring together that groundbreaking work with concepts of Post-Modernism— theorized largely by novelists, architects, and architectural semioticians—in order to arrive at a more comprehensive critical framework for understanding the complexity of both production and reception within contemporary cultures. While this book in some ways is built on this very stimulating work, the main thrust of my argument is that we need to be far more radical in our reformulations in order to account for that complexity.

While I hope, of course, that my argument will find a receptive audience, I realize full well that much of this book will provoke consternation in many readers, if not the occasional fit of apoplexy. For some critics, my suggestion that we need to question the utility of concepts like “mass culture” and “the dominant” would be rather like suggesting that we abandon “the devil” to a group of fundamentalist ministers. “Mass culture,” “the dominant,” and “the devil” serve as convenient concepts on which the blame for all evil may be easily fixed, providing a simple narrative explanation for why utopian states cannot be achieved, as well as allowing for self-righteous poses in the present. But while “the devil” might make for marvelous explanatory myths, most sophisticated theologians would stress that such myths only trivialize the complexity of moral questions and human psychology. In much the same way, “the dominant” ruling class that controls all facets of cultural life may well be a fascinating methodological fiction, but it only obstructs our understanding of the complexity of the conflictive power relations that constitute our cultures. A more sophisticated understanding of *domination* as a process must begin with the rejection of the monolithic category of “the dominant.” This book, then, is intended to be heretical, but only in order to help bring about a profound re-examination of the sacred “givens” of cultural analysis which lead to the automatic rejection of both popular culture and Post-Modernism. It is intended to be antagonistic only to those who refuse to see the need for such a re-examination, to those critics on both the left and the right for whom cultural analysis has become a reified set of value judgments.

Adopting an eclectic approach was essential for overcoming the territorial isolation that has kept more comprehensive theories of Post-Modernism from emerging. In attempting to trace key points of contact as well as the significant differences in the way the “object” that is contemporary culture has been

constructed, I have concentrated on the all-pervasiveness of certain features of textuality. Because of this broad scope it will be easy sport to find significant omissions in my argument, and most readers will surely be surprised at one time or another that I have failed to mention a favorite text or critical work. I hope this is indeed the case, because this book is intended as a prolegomena rather than as a definitive study, a set of new and revised questions rather than more easily defended answers.

One

Cultural Fragmentation and the Rise of Discursive Ideologies

Peter Sellars, Opera Director:

We're living in a culture that is incredibly multifaceted. I grew up with John Cage and Merce Cunningham as old masters. But while they were giving birth to something, Norman Rockwell was also in his prime. With a push of a button we can choose some 18th-century Chinese lute music, the Mahler 6th, or Prince.¹

Bruce Springsteen, Rock Musician:

We learned more than a three-minute record baby than we ever learned in school . . . So maybe we can cut someplace of our own with these drums and these guitars, 'Cause we made a promise we swore we'd always remember, No retreat, baby, no surrender.²

Tomas Borge Martinez, Sandinista:

Perhaps I could say that I was led to the revolutionary life by reading an author named Karl May. Karl May, not Karl Marx. May was a German who wrote novels about the wild West in the United States (without ever visiting America). I was about 12 years old when I read his books and they affected me profoundly. In the May westerns, the heroes were archetypes of nobility—courageous, audacious, personally honest. I wanted to be like them. But since in Nicaragua we didn't have the Great Plains of the North American West, and since the injustices we were facing were different from those in Western novels, I decided to confront Nicaraguan injustices.³

Within the past decade a wide range of cultural critics representing radically different ideological perspectives have pointed to the crisis within cultural life.