1968: The Two Popular Cultures

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There were at least two different popular cultures in 1968. During the year running from September 1967 through August 1968, the following events took place in the United States: The Stop The Draft Week demonstrations at the U.S. Army induction center in Oakland, where several thousand people clogged the streets, fought back against two thousand police officers and spray-painted “Che Is Alive and Well” on the sidewalks; the Pentagon demonstration, where thousands of demonstrators broke off from the sedate march of tens of thousands and sat down in front of the Pentagon in front of fixed bayonets, staying there all night, urging troops to change sides; the McCarthy campaign; the Kennedy campaign; the barely noticed killing of three black students and wounding of thirty-three others for trying to enter a segregated bowling alley in Orangeburg, South Carolina, four years after the Civil Rights Act had banned segregation; the Tet offensive of NLF and North Vietnamese troops all over South Vietnam; LBJ’s decision not to run for President; the assassination of Martin Luther King; the assassination of Robert Kennedy; the riots or uprisings in a hundred black ghettos on the occasion of King’s assassination; the demonstrations and police offensive at the Chicago Democratic Convention in August, not to mention the French May, the Prague Spring, the Soviet tanks of August and the Mexican guns of September.

The most popular movie of 1968 was The Graduate and the number one non-fiction best-seller for many weeks was Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul On Ice. In the television year running from October 1967 through April 1968, (I borrow this point from Jeff Greenfield) the top rated entertainment programs in prime time were as follows: The Andy Griffith Show, The Lucy Show, Gomer Pyle USMC, Gunsmoke, Family Affair, Bonanza, The Red Skelton Show, The Dean Martin Show, The Jackie Gleason Show, Saturday Night at the Movies, Bewitched, The Beverly Hillbillies, The Ed Sullivan Show, The Virginian, Green Acres, The Thursday Night Movie, The Lawrence Welk Show, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, Gentle Ben, Rowan and Martin’s Laugh In, The FBI, My Three Sons, Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color.

Despite the ingenious efforts of latter day interpreters to discern vast subversive potential flickering up from these unlikely sarcophagi, and despite the occasional interruptions of the Saran-wrapped world of these TV shows by unpleasant glimmerings from the streets, I think it is safe to say that the world displayed and mummified on prime time was a world amazingly and almost uncomprehendingly at odds with the world of underground newspapers, Newsreel films, the Tet offensive, the Oakland and Pentagon demonstrations, SDS, Bonnie and Clyde and The Battle of Algiers. Between these two popular cultures there stretched a gulf virtually beyond comprehension.

It is my feeling that this abyss of incomprehension helps us to work our way toward an answer to one of the essential political questions about 1968 which is how two very different social phenomena could happen simultaneously. The first is that the anti-war movement grew from nothing to a sizable political force between 1964 and 1968—a movement whose force was capable of deposing one president, discrediting his heir apparent, bringing hundreds of thousands of people into political activity for the first time, setting limits on the murderous war in Vietnam, and eventually shattering the governing party of the United States, which has not yet recovered. The second phenomenon is this; as unpopular as the war had become—and it had become quite unpopular by the end of 1968—the anti-war movement was detested even more. A Gallup Poll of those who had seen the TV images of the demonstrations and police bash of August 1968 in Chicago revealed that 60% of the viewers felt that the police were right.

How are we to understand this discrepancy? On the one hand, a movement which was the most effective anti-interventionist movement in history, a movement that was also going to leave behind a shadow force which would keep the brakes on many if not all of the expeditionary wars of the past fifteen years. On the other hand, this movement was not going to leave behind an organized force, let alone a politically mobilized majority. A fire-break was built around the movement which would prevent it from becoming still more popular and more consequential.
than it already was. It is this failure, as well as the success of the movement, that has to be explained if we are going to learn from the glories of the sixties past, not just sing along with them.

I can't even begin to give you a sufficient sketch of an explanation for the contradictory terrain of the sixties. But, I will focus on one aspect. Part of the explanation for this strange coexistence of phenomena that point in different directions is that there were, finally, two nations by 1968 that wanted to obliterate each other or at least deny each other's existence. There was an American majority that wanted to imagine itself into the world of Andy Griffith, Gomer Pyle, and Green Acres. It yearned to be there, adorably managing the contradictions of its life. It thought that it could lean back and breathe in that world—if only those uppity blacks, hippy freaks, student radicals, Viet Cong Commies and (if all that wasn't bad enough) hypothetically bra-burning women would vanish.

None of the above were ready for prime

Andy Griffith

administration's claim that the light of victory was visible at the end of that famous and interminable tunnel.

The other America, the America that wasn't watching those twenty-five shows, the America of black militants, freaks, and radicals, was trying to express a very different sort of identity—a very different set of hopes. It also had a base in popular culture. By 1968 it had seized
that part of popular culture which stands closest to popular feelings among the young: music. This America was saying things like, “Come on Baby, Light My Fire,” “Break on Through to the Other Side,” “Dance in the Streets,” “Fight in the Streets” (or at least if you weren’t listening to Mick Jagger’s irony, that’s what you thought you heard). Instead of a slap on the back and the wave of a glad hand and what Hubert Humphrey called the politics of joy (only three weeks after the assassination of Robert Kennedy), this other America offered the clenched fist and sometimes, increasingly, the Viet Cong flag or the televisual hodgepodge image of warpaint bandolier and toy machine gun given us by Jerry Rubin - pure television in its incoherence. It was also saying, “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.” It offered the revolutionary black image, also right out of Central Casting, of Huey Newton posed in a black beret, seated in a fan shaped wicker throne, a spear upright in his left hand and a rifle in his right.

Now, how a great deal of the anti war movement moved from the politics of strategy against the war to the politics of expressing itself is a long story. It has a lot to do with the growing rift between radicals and liberals, which I think was heavily and tragically the doing of the liberals. Radicals and liberals, having been symbiotic to each other throughout the earlier sixties, became the unintentional casualties of 1968. Because the liberals were too enamored of power during the Democratic years when they were riding high, and because the radicals were sometimes too hopeful and sometimes too desperate and there were not enough of us, the partial liberal/radical alliance of the earlier sixties broke down. This dissolution of the liberal/radical alliance led to the abandonment of the idea of a strategic politics - a politics that you enter into because of its ends and because of your belief that it can produce those ends, as opposed to a politics that you enter in order to feel good. Strategic politics came to be replaced by an expressive

The Red Skelton Show
politics where you let your disgust, your fear, your loathing and your jubilation show, hang out, and you shake, rattle and roll along with it.

Of course, it wasn’t only the anti-war lefties who were in that frame of mind by 1968. There were other currents that felt the same way. Primary among such currents were the hippies and freaks who wanted to put their bodies on the line, not just once in a while in order to accomplish some specific political end, but spiritually every day, as if they believed, as Sartre once said about his generation, that “the world is new because we are new in the world.”

I would like to take a moment to talk about the power of the images that were put forward in the name of this “expressive politics,” how these images worked their way into the national mainstream. Certainly one of the elements of media that came to play a significant part by 1968 was television news. It bears remembering that although we sometimes think that broadcast news programs have been with us since at least the days of the Old Testament, one of the things that was interesting about television in the sixties was that television news was essentially new, that is, they didn’t know quite how to do it yet.

Television news adopted the half hour format in the Fall of 1963 on CBS and NBC. ABC didn’t move to a half hour format until 1967. Television news, not quite knowing what it was, was feeling its way, interestingly enough, just as the anti-war movement was feeling its way, and the two surged up in an intimate relationship to each other. Television news helped tear America in half, or rather 60-40, if we go back to that 1968 Gallup poll. TV news polarized the country into the country of The Red Skelton Show and the country of “Break on Through to the Other Side”.

For most people, in most living rooms, the images that pass for reality on television are pried out of narrative context and the ones that register best are the lurid ones. As Paul Krassner and the other founding yuppies understood in 1967-68, the nation is wired; as much as any force, television sets the emotional agenda. Those who knew how to produce the most vivid images got space because the producers of television for the most part heeded the call from Central Casting: Get us some freaks. Statesmen are expected to look statesmanlike, demonstrators are supposed to look demonstrative. Presidents call press conferences (most of them do, anyway). Movements, in order to express themselves, call demonstrations. This is the half truth in the right-wing attack on the media - that the media do in this curious way relay a certain version of anti-authority.

Knowing these principles of newsworthiness, we enter the opposition’s media genius. They cracked the code and turned it to their own use. There were the bearers of Viet Cong flags, for example, and the burners of American flags, knowing full well that if one American flag was burning and a hundred were being carried upright, that it would be the spectacle of the burning flag which would make an impression and end up on the evening news. In 1968 there were scads of anti-war projects and leaders, quiet and patient and unsung, but the celebrities were the likes of Mark Rudd and Abbie Hoffman (whose shtick was at least genuine and original in many ways) and Jerry Rubin, a truly manipulative worker of the television news routines.

Abbie and Jerry, to give them their due, had a theory. The theory was that the young (a sort of diffuse crowd) were a revolutionary constituency. Young people flocking into Venice or the Lower East Side were, in Abbie’s terminology, “runaway slaves” who would be radicalized by billy clubs and by emulation. If you showed them the image of what a revolutionary looked like on television, then they would spring into action - a sort of rural electrification theory which led to meteoric careers in revolution but a very poor idea of the staying power, let alone the strategy, that serious politics requires. Needless to say, mainstream television had very little interest in conveying the texture of opposition. There were some exceptions in public television, which was not yet old enough or absorbing enough to be of interest to corporate sponsors.

Mainstream television had very little interest in conveying what the interior of the opposition was about. It had very little interest in conveying the intense and growing disaffection that was spreading through American colleges - not simply the elite, Harvards and Stanfords, but
down the class ladder to San Francisco State, Kent State, etc. Nor was it capable of conveying the intense longing of white freaks who were looking for some kind of God, "lost in a Romane wilderness of pain," as Jim Morrison sang it, in a country whose leadership had gone mad with the belief that they were saving a nation that they had invented, South Viet Nam, by sprinkling it with napalm. Mostly television news gave us not that famous "substance" only recently outfoxed by pretty-face "style" in the world according to Broadcast News, but surges of electrons on the surface of things.

So television news played a part in amplifying this sense of a divided country. The cut-loose style, the Wild In The Streets style (to name yet another strange cult film of 1968), ultimately made for a kind of politics which imploded, a kind of desperado politics, self-destructive politics, because, finally, self-expression is no substitute for strategy. What made you feel good was not necessarily what was going to help end the war or transcend the misery of the ghetto. From the broadcast of lurid images came an aestheticizing of politics, politics as theater, feel-good politics, bad politics, which helped isolate the anti-war militants. In 1936 Walter Benjamin decried this kind of aestheticizing of politics, which he said was, the business of fascism, when he wrote: "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war."

By the late sixties, a fair part of the left had devolved into dada gestures and violent gestures claiming to be the politics of revolution, which they were not. Where upon the dominant culture was able to describe the left in the terms used by the cops in Arthur Penn's version of Bonnie and Clyde: "They ain't got no respect." To which we said, "Right on."

I don't want to be entirely dismissive of youth politics, identity politics, because there was really something quite wonderful about that sense of trembling on the threshold of something truly amazing, such a widespread feeling in 1968. Whether it took the form of drug experiences or the sense of political epiphany, a sense of revelation, the sense that the final days were coming due—that sort of millenarian feeling was everyday stuff and it was exhilarating. The audacity of thinking that you could transcend limits by thinking your way past them— a kind of politics of willpower, in which limits were just some grown up bad-vides bring-down. We and I mean this globally, not just me and my friends, but Jerry Rubin and his friends and Andy Warhol and his friends—we're all children of the cornucopia which was the longest, giddiest boom in American history.

The rallying cry of 1968 was becoming "Master the Impossibilities." The idea was that you could act as if the world were other than it is, and make it so. That was an amazing idea based on one of the founding ideas of the sixties as a whole, which was the idea of direct action, the idea that you could sit-in at a lunch counter and act as if segregation didn't exist. The idea of the sit-in was not to go and make a demand, knock on somebody's door and say, "You're doing something bad, we humbly petition you to stop it." No, the idea of the sit-in was that you imagined yourself to be living already in a world in which segregation didn't exist - and by God, if you suffered enough then you could bring it about. Or you could take a pill and think as if God were already radiating through a burning bush and damned if paradise weren't already here, "Come on baby, let the good times roll." "Remember what the dormouse said, "Feed Your Head."

You could follow Marx and say, "Change the world", or Rimbaud and say, "Change life," or you could search, as so many did, for a sort of rapprochement and say, "Change both," or even, "Changing life is changing the world." This kind of politics refused to take anything for granted. It said, "Express yourself;" it said, "Make the decisions that affect your life." It said, "If they ask you for some collateral, pull down your pants" (which LA's great Jim Morrison actually did on more than one occasion). Ultimately the great allure-and delusion-of this strain of politics was the belief that if you demanded the future vehemently enough, the millennium would be at hand.

This style of politics had touch-stones, not only in the underground press where you would expect to find it, but also in another sector of popular culture. Of course in music, the apocalyptic mood was enormous, but it manifested
itself in the arena of commercial cinema as well. I would like to talk about two films that circulated in 1968: Bonnie and Clyde and The Battle of Algiers.

One of the sources for counter-images in 1968 popular culture was the commercial cinema, an arena which offered a very different way of thinking about what was and wasn’t “commercial” than television did. The image of doomed noble outsider outlaws was a marketable image. There was obviously a lineage back to Brando’s, Wild One and James Dean’s, Rebel Without A Cause in the Fifties. But the 1968 hero had something distinct to offer: only in ’67 and ’68 did the outsider hero relish the purity of the blood bond that kept him an outsider. Only in 1968 was blood essential to the tragic and exhilarating fate of the

then there have been no mighty myths and now we hunt for them in lonely balconies watching Bonnie and Clyde.

He was onto something. Arthur Penn understood something of the sensibility that was coming into being. Bonnie and Clyde launched not only new fashions, but a kind of hero cult, a stylized great plains myth version of Huey Newton and Che Guevera, in gripping color.

As Pauline Kael wrote at the time, there had been earlier movie versions of the real life story of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow in 1937 and 1949. These films were more or less Depression-style social realism. They were films about how hard times forced people to commit crime in order to get back at the banker or simply to scrape

outsider. I’m going to quote the prominent movie critic, Abbie Hoffman—who wrote very perceptively in his 1968 book, Revolution For the Hell Of It,

America lost its balls in the frontier and since

up a living. Penn’s versions of Bonnie and Clyde were very different. They were Sixties people set back in the Thirties. They were creatures of will. They were free-standing angels of revolt, without regrets, no looking back, no alibis. Crime for them wasn’t compelled by poverty or foreclo-
sure, it was chosen. Bonnie and Clyde went on the
run because that was the way to be young. The
gun wasn’t an instrument of redistributive justice,
it was a fetish, an instrument of pure bleeding
death, a shocker, a prick, no apologies given or
received. They lived by aesthetics, they died by
aesthetics. The rest of the people were thick-
headed rubes. We, together with Bonnie and
Clyde, were “the people.” Anybody with spunk
would go off with Bonnie and Clyde. Gerald
Long, who then reviewed films for the National
Guardian, and later went off with the Weather-
men, wrote at the time that Bonnie and Clyde
were like Frantz Fanon and an NLF hero named
Nguyen Van Troi. Long said more or less, “If a car
full of revolutionaries like them, pulled up at the
gas station where you pumped gas for a living,

Now the effects of a movie are always
complicated, confused and ultimately unknow-
able. But I do know the absurd effect that Bonnie
and Clyde had on me. In the summer of 1967, af-
ter the first of the three times I saw the film, I
happened to be walking past the National Guard
Armory in Manhattan. It was the summer of
1967, a summer of great upheavals, violent up-
surges in black communities. And, I was so angry
at the police that I reached into my pocket for a
little absurd tourist pocket knife that my mother
had brought back from a trip to Italy, desperately
wanting to have that knife so that I could rip a hole
in the tire of the National Guard jeep that was
parked in front of the Armory. Mysteriously,
anti-climatically, I was missing the knife that
night, so I didn’t get to do the deed. But there is

wouldn’t you go off with them?” It was the New
York Review caricaturist, David Levine, who
understood that the issue brought to the surface by
the film was the enormity of violence—he drew
Lyndon Johnson as Clyde and Secretary of State
Dean Rusk as Bonnie.

no denying the emotional effect of the film.

Another film that was significant in the
psychic life of the movement in 1968 was Gillo
Pontcorvo’s, The Battle Of Algiers. Beloved by
black and white revolutionaries, it offered a
brilliant re-enactment of an actual anti-colonial
uprising. There were groups in 1968 who used this film virtually as a sort of study group curriculum - out of context. They neglected the fact that the actual battle of Algiers, the one that was re-enacted in the film, pre-supposed years of organization and a broad anti-colonial spirit whose successful revolution was not based on the simple act of picking up a gun. You weren’t going to drive “the man” out of the ghetto with war whoops.

The main movement reading of the film went like this: “Don’t bother to organize,” or as Mark Rudd said to me, contemptuously, at an SDS meeting after the Chicago demonstrations in ’68, “Organizing is just another word for going slow.” Another reading of the Battle of Algiers was: If you’re going to organize, limit it to cadres. And then, once you’ve gotten the organization together, it is justifiable to plant bombs in cafes (Fortunately, there was a lot more talk about that than there was imitation).

I want to come back now to the paradoxical fact that I pointed to earlier: the fact of a radical movement that accomplished as much as it did, and yet no more. I want to say a few words about the consequences of this paradox, the consequences of the movement’s own self-enclosure and final isolation. One of the awful delusions about this whole period is that the movements of the sixties, which may or may not have been noble and well intentioned, were in any case, futile; you can’t change history.

Interestingly, it is the right who seem to have a very different understanding of the events. What the right begins to understand is that despite the movement’s failures and shortcomings, they have a sort of shadow presence, even today, twenty years later. There are many ways in which it reveals itself. Some people have argued that it is a cultural presence, and I would agree with that, but I think it is also a political presence. It is easy to forget in a culture that is systematically amnesiac, that the sixties did bring blacks and women into political citizenship, and that while many specific accomplishments have been eroded and repealed, all has not been lost. The coalition that defeated Judge Robert Bork was in
fact, the resurrection of the old civil rights coalition of twenty-five years ago. Exactly the same forces; unions, women’s organizations, civil rights organizations, liberals, civil libertarians, and so on.

The shadow movement is also an anti-war force. That shadow movement in fact, defeated aid to the contras. I’m very far from arguing that this represents the millennium or that it comes anywhere near close to what, in 1968, we thought might be possible. The left, such as it is today, is contained, it is timid, it is marginal. There are many important movements of ethnic groups, there are local organizing projects, there are ecological and environmental groups. There are all kinds of people doing all kinds of sensible things in the professions which continue the values which they acted on in 1968. But, for all the achievements, I think it should not have been surprising that the movements of the sixties fell short of the millennium, and the reason is that what the movements of the sixties really propelled was a radical re-working of values, not a revolution but something both more primitive and basic, a reformation.

I think that’s what the Sixties were all about: A fundamental reworking of values toward three principles. Sometimes I think we were pursuing a politics of limits with three dimensions to it. The first places a limit on what the species, or any of its representatives or would-be representatives, are entitled to do to the world, as a whole, to the planet. You are not entitled to blow it up, you are not entitled to poison it and make it uninhabitable. Second, any collective, whether nation, gender, or ethnic group, is not entitled to do certain things to another nation, gender, and ethnic group - there is a limit to what one gang is permitted to do to another gang. Third, there are limits to what any collective is entitled to do to an individual. You’re not permitted to torture that individual, to deprive that individual of livelihood or the power of speech. I believe that these are the three principles around which the movements of the sixties clustered and which they agreed on. These are very subversive principles. They may sound pious, but if you follow their logic, they are deeply disturbing to the culture in which many people have many privileges and investments. It is, therefore, no surprise that the reformation of the sixties led eventually to what we have been living through, namely the counter reformation of the 80’s.

One of the things that I did not quite understand in 1968 was that you do not propound the need for reformation without expecting a counter-reformation. After all, we were accusing those in power of committing atrocities, of getting fat from them, of having unearned privileges. We accused them of inheriting wicked ways from a system deeply rooted in history. We insisted that they cease their wicked ways, and cease immediately. What did we think the system was going to do in response? It hit us over the head. It tried to roll us back. In the person of Ronald Reagan and his co-conspirators, that is what it did. We have been living in a counter-reformation - which has, however passed its high-water mark as we watch it disband with every passing news show and court case.

I don’t feel gloomy about what was not accomplished in 1968. The best of the spirit of 1968 was the generosity, the passion, the community, the ingenuity, the urgency, the insistence on testing limits (even if they weren’t always tests that I approved of) and to use a very old fashioned word, the love. It is that totality which has receded, but it is still a presence in American life. I don’t mean that cryogenically its been preserved in films and books. I mean something more spectral than that, a sort of ever-returning but never entirely returned repressed, that in curious ways is among us, but has yet to find its political expression so that we are inundated with various adulterated forms of it. Whether the letter of 1968 can be repeated is doubtful - the conditions are too different. But the best and the wisest of its spirit can be neither repealed, nor repeated. The reformation, in its complicated and mysterious forms, continues, and its destiny is known to none of us.