Chapter 5

# The Visual Arts beyond Modernism

Through this book I have argued that modernism and the cold war were equally important as shaping forces on cultural production in the 1950s. Some practitioners were trying to move beyond modernist art and others retreating from it, but it remained the controlling aesthetic paradigm of the decade. As a historical mode modernism became institutionalized in the 1950s as the Nobel Prizes for the trio of modernist writers Faulkner, Eliot and Hemingway suggest. But this did not mean that modernism had lost its contemporary relevance. It was just that many realized that art could never be the same after the Holocaust and the atom bomb.

The art critic Clement Greenberg was worried that modernist and popular styles had become increasingly indistinct from each other in the 1950s. He made this case over a decade earlier in his Marxist essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), arguing that the economic profits of easily consumable kitsch were a major 'source of temptation' for serious artists. Greenberg claimed that 'ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely', and by the mid-1950s he was concerned that modernism and kitsch had become deeply entangled.[1] This opinion that modernist artists should be wary of contemporary pressures was largely due to the ubiquity of visual culture in the 1950s.

Visual culture came to dominate the decade more than ever before, with television, widescreen cinema and musical spectacles increasing the opportunity for visual consumption. Karal Ann Marling argues that visuality pervaded 'everyday life', from the picture windows of suburban houses and glossy ads for kitchen gadgetry to the painting-by-numbers craze of the mid-1950s and the rapid turnover of new colours and styles in women's fashion. Mary Caputi explores the ways in which postwar modernity was so 'filled with noise, activity, and

change' that it is difficult to view the decade as anything more than a 'commotion' of visual styles.[2]

However, when it comes to considering the visual arts – by which this chapter groups together painting, photography, sculpture, design and multimedia products – modernism was a guiding force that facilitated the production of some forms and discouraged others. Regional painting and overtly politicized art were almost taboo in the early 1950s, when abstraction dominated the agenda: from car and aeronautical design to the clean lines of International Style architecture; from Charles Eames's innovative chairs and sofas to experiments in clay and ceramics on the West Coast; from Ellsworth Kelly's giant murals to the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock, Hans Hofmann and Barnett Newman. The emphasis on 'newness' was everywhere, as Pollock noted in his 1950 call for contemporary artists to devise new techniques: 'it seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or any past culture'.[3] But, while there were many different modernist directions for 'making it new' in the 1920s, by the late 1940s the most interesting experiments were in the realm of abstraction. One approach to abstract art – and modernism more generally – is to see it as a retreat from everyday life into aesthetics, but this chapter will argue that debates about the status of art and the relationship between 'form' and 'function' were crucial for identifying the direction of postwar culture.

The status of art was also central to debates about high and low culture after the war. Greenberg had earlier pondered how a single culture could give birth both to T. S. Eliot's poetry and Tin Pan Alley and after the war he shared the Frankfurt School critics' suspicion of mass culture, particularly its tendency to pull anything innovative into the mainstream, as evident in the Piet Mondrian floor pattern which casually opens *Desk Set* (1957), the Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy film about television office politics. From this perspective, abstract art may well degenerate into 'merely decorative' styles and Pollock be seen as little more than a 'grandiose decorator'.[4] While one of the traits of modernism in the 1950s is that it could no longer be wholly separated from mass culture (as Andreas Huyssen argues in *After the Great Divide*, 1986), Greenberg was caught between his suspicion that middlebrow culture was responsible for promoting standardization by inhibiting 'idiosyncrasy, temperament, and strong-mindedness' and his tacit belief that a strong middle class was necessary for cultural vitality.[5]

These tensions within Greenberg's art criticism are an index of the two standard accounts of postwar art. The first account ran from the 1950s through to the early 1970s and emphasized the aesthetics of form, whereas the second account emerged in the 1970s to place ideology and cultural politics at centre stage. During his career Greenberg wrote criticism of both kinds, but in the immediate postwar period when anticommunist pressures were at their most intense, he focused on painters who refused to be derivative and embodied 'nerve and truth' in their art.[6] Greenberg's postwar essays focused on the artwork itself much more than its consumption. The growth of exhibitions and gallery spaces played an important role in the postwar recognition of abstract art, but the widespread feeling among critics in the 1950s, including Greenberg, was that the public consumption of modernist art might lead to its dilution into the mainstream.

An indication of how far art criticism has come since Greenberg is evident in two retro-films that explore the art scene of the 1950s. *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003) uses abstract expressionist art as an index for personal freedom, as teacher Katherine Ann Watson (played by Julia Roberts) encourages her female students at Wellesley College to broaden the narrow domestic possibilities that life in the 1950s had to offer them. The other film, *Far From Heaven* (2002), is a pastiche of Douglas Sirk's domestic melodramas, but offers a complex response to postwar art by setting one of its most challenging scenes at an abstract art exhibition held in a Connecticut gallery. The improbable love that emerges across class and gender lines between suburban housewife Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore) and her black gardener Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert) is brought to a head when Raymond responds sensitively to the abstract painting. Todd Haynes's film is self-consciously revisionist, particularly as few black artists practised abstract art in the 1950s or could find patrons during the cold war. The Harlem artist Norman Lewis is one exception with abstractions such as *Tenement I* and *Blending* (both 1952) and *Harlem Turns White* (1955), but many went into exile in Europe or Mexico, such as Elizabeth Catlett who became professor of sculpture at the National School of Fine Arts in Mexico.[7] Raymond's appreciation of abstract art in *Far From Heaven* is one way in which he avoids the stereotypes of his class and race, creating unease among the Connecticut socialites for whom the paintings just blur with the décor.

In a decade when very few black and women artists were given recognition, Haynes's film explodes the myth that only a class of experts, scholars and art critics could understand modernist art. Of

women painters in the 1950s only Lee Krasner (Jackson Pollock's wife) received much recognition and women photographers were also very scarce, with only Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White and Esther Bubley having public names – Bubley after winning the *Photography* magazine Grand Prize in 1954. But, even though they did not garner the attention of their male contemporaries, others such as Hedda Sterne, Grace Hartigan and Louise Nevelson were practising artists who found an expressive medium in abstract art.[8] Both standard accounts of postwar art – (1) formal innovation and (2) the link with cold war politics – do not do justice to what Ann Gibson calls 'the power of European, male, and heterosexual identity' within the industry.[9] In *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (1997) Gibson offers a rejoinder to discussions of the eight or so white male painters who still dominate discussions of abstract expressionism by focusing on women and ethnic painters. Her argument is that it is 'necessary either to pull "Abstract Expressionism" into a different shape or to admit that its "universality" stops short at the boundaries of race and gender'.[10]

One reason why formalism has inherited a bad name is that the freedom of the artist to immerse him or herself in a realm of 'pure art' can be interpreted as an evasion of contemporary life. But Gibson argues that the historical reality was quite different. Artists, collectors and patrons were engaged in broader cultural currents and undergoing a power struggle which led to a diverse range of forms, some echoing the high modernism of the 1920s, some the politicized modernism of the 1930s, and some hybrid practices that stretched the limits of modernism. For example, Louise Nevelson's experiments *Sky Cathedral* (1958) and *Dawn's Wedding Feast* (1959) were unlike any previous modernist work in challenging gendered constructions (male extrusions and female intrusions) that psychologist Erik Erikson had identified in his popular book *Childhood and Society* (1950).

In order to view the plurality of visual forms in the 1950s it is necessary to broaden the discussion from standard accounts of abstract art. Despite the drive to standardize architecture, early 1950s design was characterized by a plethora of different modes. Manufacturers were leading the game because they saw a buoyant consumer market and thousands of new suburban homes to furnish, but designers were implementing new techniques learnt from industry such as the how to mould plastics, how to spot-weld wood and metal, and how to use lightweight materials such as fibreglass, polyester and foam rubber.[11] The major reason why, from a distance, design in the 1950s looks dull and uninspired is because the federal court prevented designers taking

out patents on their furniture designs, allowing manufacturers to churn out cheap imitations. Even though Charles Eames found a new vein of creativity in 1956 after a few uninspired years and the first half of the decade saw many new designs (with showcases such as the annual Good Design Show in Chicago sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art), by 1957 innovative design was jeopardised by the boom in affordable imitations.[12]

As this chapter will discuss in relation to painting, photography and multimedia, abstraction can be seen as either a flight from the social and ideological forces or as an indirect but critical response to the same forces. Sometimes the artist offered an alternative reality beyond advertising and commerce, and at other times plunged the viewer into the very midst of consumer culture.

## Abstraction and Ideology

One way of periodizing 1950s art is to take the death of Jackson Pollock in August 1956 as the symbolic end of abstract expressionism which had come to dominate the American art scene in the 1940s and early 1950s. This moment was followed in 1958 by 'a dramatic upheaval' in the art world, marked by solo shows by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and the 'Sixteen Americans' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1959–60 featuring a younger generation of artists: Johns, Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Louise Nevelson and Frank Stella.[13] This periodization is helpful, but it not only turns Pollock into a mythical hero, but creates an uncertain hiatus in mid-decade, and sees late 1950s art as a prelude for 1960s pop art. One way of moving beyond this strict periodization is to focus on shifting identity politics as Ann Gibson does, or to position postwar art within the context of cold war culture.

Two key examples of this second trend are a 1974 essay by Jane de Hart Mathews 'Art and Politics in Cold War America' and Serge Guilbaut's 1983 book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. Up to the 1970s there was only an implicit sense that cold war politics and abstract art were linked, partly because it was not widely known that the CIA was sponsoring the Committee for Cultural Freedom, an organization which took American ideas to Europe during the Marshall Plan years. Before the mid-1970s, postwar abstract art was seen mainly as a shift from the socially committed art of the 1930s into a realm of 'pure art'. It was also a strategic move for artists with socialist leanings: abstraction, at least in theory, was beyond reprisal and

censor. There was no equivalent of *Red Channels* to threaten artists, and unlike writers, actors and directors, artists could be castigated only by publicly making subversive statements or declaring allegiance to radical groups.

Private patrons based in New York such as Peggy Guggenheim and Samuel Kootz had been showcasing modern art for some time in the Art of This Century Gallery and the Kootz Gallery (which opened in 1942 and 1945). But, in her 1974 essay, Mathews looks closely at public patronage in the 1950s and the efforts of some patrons to recruit abstract art for promoting American ideas abroad. In 1950 Pope Pius XII was condemning abstract art as immoral and others were suspicious that it was actually 'a weapon in the Communist arsenal', but the liberating use of paint and vast canvases could be seen, conversely, as the embodiment of American freedom.[14]

In the late 1940s there was a general suspicion of the term 'modern', though. The Institute of Modern Art in Boston changed its name to the Institute of Contemporary Art and released an anti-modern manifesto in 1948, fuelled by the fear that 'modern' artists were linked to the godless scientism of communism, whereas 'contemporary' and 'new' were more affirmative national signifiers. On this account, public patronage was an attempt to co-opt avant-garde painting during the cold war; painters previously thought to be subversive now were seen as 'the embodiment of the kind of freedom denied their colleagues behind the iron curtain, their works celebrated as quintessentially American'.[15]

Mathews notes that, despite the institutionalization of literary modernism, in the world of painting there was still a suspicion of the term 'modern' until the mid-1960s and the temporary thawing of the cold war. However, Guilbaut sees a more complex series of transactions in which international modernism had been 'stolen' from Paris by New York. Guilbaut's thesis echoes Clement Greenberg's sense that modernism was not working itself out in bohemian Paris, but in the exhibition spaces of Manhattan. As a founding member of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom Greenberg was instrumental in rescuing modern art, aided by the joint manifesto of MoMA and the Whitney Museum in March 1950 which defended modern art against communist charges ('we oppose any attempt to make art or opinion about art conform to a single point of view') and the painters Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt's publication Modern Artists in America which focused on the inherent mutability of abstract art.[16] It is within this cold war context of conflicting ideologies – American

diversity versus Soviet dogma – that critics, since the 1970s, have placed postwar abstract art.

Guilbaut detects that the artwork itself and its public patronage need separating out to understand how abstract art 'came to be accepted and used, without their being aware of it, to represent liberal American values, first at home, in the museums, and then abroad'.[17] One problem with Guilbaut's perspective is that it focuses on the struggle between Paris and New York, and neglects other artistic centres such as Warsaw (which recovered its ability to promote abstract art in 1956 after years of Soviet censorship), São Paulo (which hosted a large international exhibition in winter 1953–4), and Mexico City (which held the First Inter-American Biennial of Painting and Graphics in summer 1958). Another problem with Guilbaut's approach is that it empowers patrons and critics and leaves the artist blindly experimenting in a pure medium barely aware of cold war concerns. On this view, the patron and critic frame the artwork and not the artist.

It is dangerous to revive the theory of the artist having sole authority over his or her art, but it is also misleading to divorce process from product. For this reason, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard places abstract art within a cold war framework:

> Abstraction of the 1950s, was not the subtle, analytical, experimental, classical . . . abstractionism of the prewar period. It was a desperate, nervous, pathetic, and explosive abstraction. It was the very abstract image of the Cold War itself, for the Cold War is abstract, it is something suspended, it does not break out, it is simultaneously conflict and deterrence, just as pictorial abstraction is simultaneously forms and forms deferred, a play of signs and a violent dissuasion of the signs of reality.[18]

Baudrillard's theory that abstract painting was the reflection of an abstract war of ideologies is seductively neat, but the problem is that he pays little attention to the diversity of painterly styles in the 1950s in favour of a uniform cold war response. One could perhaps take 1954 (and the demise of McCarthyism) as a moment when 'nervous, pathetic, and explosive abstraction' gave way to a different kind of art more attuned to the consumerist impulses of the mid-1950s. But, even then, abstract artists did not dip into a single paint pot and avant-garde art cannot simply be seen as a reply 'to the Cold War's blackmail threat of annihilation', celebrating 'its own disappearance by an aggravated symbolic gesture', as Baudrillard describes.[19]

With more recent studies exploring the CIA's sponsorship of abstract art such as Frances Stonor Saunders' *The Cultural Cold War* (2000) it is easy to dismiss early formalist art criticism. Greenberg's writings from the 1950s are often criticized for lacking the materialist edge of his earlier essays, and Guilbaut complains that Irving Sandler's influential *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970) was typical of the 'positive, heroic, and optimistic account' of mid-century art.[20] Rather than just accepting the 'cold war patronage' thesis, though, one way of gauging the transitions in abstract art is to focus briefly on two artists who bookend the decade but are often sidelined in a discussion of 1950s painting. The first is German-born painter Hans Hofmann, a contemporary of Picasso, who featured in MoMA's exhibition 'Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America' in early 1951 and had a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1957 at the age of seventy-six, and the second is Frank Stella from Malden, Massachusetts who, only two years out of college, had his first solo show in autumn 1960 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in Manhattan.

Hofmann is a classic example of an abstract artist who focused on process: the texture of the brushstroke, the smear of the palette, and the vibrant field of colour. Leaving behind representational art as a young man, the starting point for Hofmann's paintings from the mid-1930s was a field of forces in which elements and concentrations are held in tension. Greenberg was a great fan of Hofmann because he was a genuine experimentalist and 'a virtuoso of invention' who was very difficult to classify because he transcended national traditions. As one of a generation of émigré artists making the Atlantic crossing in the early 1930s, Hofmann travelled through Germany, France and Italy, before arriving on the East Coast with an avant-garde interest in fractured forms, distorted lines and vibrant colour palettes that lent a 'new liveness of surface' to American painting.[21]

Although he encouraged figurative painting in his art students (one of whom was Robert De Niro's father), Hofmann was particularly interested in complex shapes and an extravagant splurge of colours that characterized his early 1950s paintings such as *Magenta and Blue* (1950), *Scotch and Burgundy* (1951), his *Orchestral Dominance* paintings in yellow, red and green (1954), and *Festive Pink* (1959).[22] Above all, Hofmann's paintings offered viewers the freedom to enter a world of colour and light. He was distinctly modern in his belief that the arts need liberating from 'all the coagulated wisdom of the Academy', and has often been viewed as a synthesist in his fusion of disparate styles and search for new painterly intensities.[23]

Even though he remained prolific through the 1950s, what makes Hofmann's painting more resonant for the late 1940s was his insistence on 'pure painting', in which he sought a 'color complex' emitting 'a multitude of color vibrations'.[24] Critics continued to focus on the 'sheer driving power' of Hofmann's paintings and 'the reckless but assured way with which he tackles complexes of form and color that would bring another artist to his knees'.[25]Although one could use Einstein's theory of relativity as an explanatory framework of Hofmann's art (and for abstract expressionism more generally) or seize upon paintings with titles such as *Holocaust* (1953), *The Ravine* (1954) and even *Towering Spaciousness* (1956) to locate Hofmann's work within a broader social matrix, his statements from the 1950s have little reference to a changing cultural landscape. Rather, he suggested that abstract art has the power to take the viewer beyond the temporal moment into an almost mystical realm where 'inner perception' and 'spiritual projection' prevail.[26]

By the time Frank Stella began painting as a young twenty-two-year-old fresh out of Princeton in 1958, Hofmann's brand of abstract expressionism had, as William Rubin comments, 'run its course'.[27] Given that the movement attracted painters whose styles were both hot (Pollock, Hofmann, Klein) and cool (Newman, Rothko, Reinhardt), the young Stella was left at the end of the 1950s with a feeling of impasse. Although he was excited by the techniques of the abstract expressionists and later said 'I was a Hofmann student without knowing I was one', Stella looked back to the geometrical arrangements of an older painter of Hofmann's generation – Piet Mondrian – for sparking his interest in hard shapes, lines, diagonals and stripes.[28] Stella was also excited by the relationship between object and field that he detected in Jasper Johns's paintings which he first saw in Manhattan in early 1958. Where Pollock and Hofmann were interested in the texture of the paint, Johns's and Stella's interest was in flat objects and mundane patterns. Stella sought simplicity rather than complexity in his early enamel paintings: this can be seen in the series of white horizontal stripes and thin black lines in *Astoria* (1958) and the black cruciform shapes broken by thin white lines in *Die Fahne hoch* (1959) – one of the first in Stella's series of 'black paintings' which he worked on between 1959 and 1964. By focusing on black shapes accented by white lines in the upward diagonals of *Point of Pines*, the concentric black rectangular stripes of *Tomlinson Court Park*, and twin vertical blocks of black stripes of *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor* (all 1959), Stella was striving for a kind of negative or spectral

painting that was bold and instantaneous, but also 'generated a glow or shimmer in an ambiguous space'.[29]

Whereas abstract expressionism was recruited as a symbol of American freedom, Stella's paintings seem, like Hofmann's, to be beyond appropriation. At a casual glance the images are no more than decorative patterns. But for the critic tempted by allegory, Stella's early painting can be read as a paradoxical embodiment of 'containment' and 'openness': the spectral forms are bound in relation to other similar forms but open into spaces beyond the picture. Stella called these paintings 'groundwork structures', architectural in their geometric arrangements, but also dynamic as the white lines catch the light, or the eye moves across the pattern in search of somewhere to rest.[30] Because it is difficult to place Stella's work within a wider cultural framework, the temptation is to read him as a pure formalist, but this would be to ignore the way in which his early images break down barriers between decorative and high art and also suggest that cultural monotony (flat lines, sameness, an absence of feature) can itself become new subject matter.

What distinguishes Hofmann's and Stella's work from the more fêted postwar artists – Pollock, Newman, Lichenstein, Warhol – is that they have no signature style, nor the sense that they belong to a particular artistic lineage. As practitioners of abstract art from different generations it is not easy to fit either Hofmann or Stella within a cold war narrative. The 'cold war patronage' thesis is vital for considering the clash of art and politics and the ways in which the painted canvas became an anticommunist weapon, but it is very easy to overlook the painter's craft.[31] On this basis Hofmann and Stella were maverick painters who, to quote William Rubin, seemed for many 'to have come virtually from nowhere, to have no stylistic heritage, and to represent a rejection of everything that painting seemed to be'.[32]

## Painting beyond Abstraction

Hofmann and Stella represent two nodal points of 1950s painting, but it is also important to discuss the broader developments in abstract art during the decade. Serge Guilbaut has argued that it is 'difficult to discuss anything in the art culture of the decade but Abstract Expressionism [because] the New York art scene is generally simplified to the point of appearing monolithic'.[33] This tendency to flatten the postwar art scene is quite common and, as Ann Gibson reminds us, it is important to look beyond familiar names to different versions of

mid-century art. A number of tensions are discernible. A painter like Robert Motherwell, for example, can be claimed either as a pure modernist in his emphasis on 'felt experience – intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic' – or as an eclectic modernist blending French, German, Italian, Spanish and Mexican styles and linking poetic, musical, sculptural influences into a uniquely American idiom. The southern artist Hale Woodruff alternated between abstract and figurative painting after World War II, but in 1950–1 he fused together the two aesthetic modes to create the huge six-panel mural *The Art of the Negro* (housed at Atlanta University) which traces African American ancestry, up to the last panel which depicts the involuntary intermingling of African and European cultures. And, while the collagist and painter Ellsworth Kelly emphasized the clarity of pure lines in his huge murals, he was also interested in escaping the picture frame and creating challenging art for public spaces.

Some critics celebrated American abstract art through the 1950s, while others complained that 'extreme abstraction', as it was sometimes called, was narrow in its range. The *New York Times* critic Howard Devree cherished the diversity of MoMA's 1951 exhibition 'Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America', but four years later he complained that the 1954–5 Whitney show displayed a narrow uniformity:

> One may group certain types of expression within the non-objective field: symbols against primarily blank backgrounds; free floating color shapes; geometrical use of color forms; an all-over color organization deriving frequently from cubism; lyrical use of color frequently suggestive of landscape or marine themes; linear mazes from the 'drip' or automatic approach . . . But within each of these groups the similarity is pronounced, the anonymity creeps in . . . there is a dehumanization effected which is at the other pole from an artist's individuality of expression.[34]

Artists and critics continued to defend abstraction into the second half of the decade but, as Devree comments, by 1955 there was a sense that something more than pure abstraction was needed. But before looking at the movement beyond abstract art – or what some critics called 'half abstraction' – it is important to recognize the dominance of the New York school at the start of the decade.

The year 1947 is often thought to mark the final transition of power in the art world from France to America, when Jackson Pollock completed his first drip paintings in New York and the 'Exposition internationale du Surréalisme' at the Galerie Maeght in Paris marked

the twilight of the school of European surrealism.[35] Surrealists and abstract expressionists were equally interested in automatic painting as an expression of the unconscious, but by the mid-1940s the abstract painters Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman were moving away from all forms of representation. The avant-garde impulse to disrupt conventional ways of seeing was still evident, but now there was no hidden depth beyond the surface of the painting. Instead, abstract expressionism confronted the viewer with 'two dimensionality, fluid space, lack of closed shapes, a deliberately unfinished quality, and an "overall" composition that diffused any notion of focus'.[36] The disruption of the surface/depth opposition led abstract expressionists into a chaotic world beyond meaning and left critics ill-equipped for interpretation. Whereas the surrealists were interested in Freudian ideas, there was no explanatory paradigm for abstract expressionism but rather a profusion of different impulses: Jungian thought, nativism, relativity, the Mediterranean, Japanese prints, nature, religion, commerce, and so on.

Another way in which American abstract painting reframed modernism is the rejection of the easel for vast canvases that filled gallery spaces. The use of massive fields of colour enabled Barnett Newman to give material form to a 'pure idea' in *The Name* (1949) or *The Word II* (1954). Although some of Pollock's paintings have evocative titles suggesting mythical patterns and organic forms – *Full Fathom Five*, *Cathedral*, *Lavender Mist* and *Autumn Rhythm* – he preferred non-specific titles such as *Number 3, 1949* and *Number 1, 1950* which give the viewer little help in understanding the painting. His all-over drip technique with its seemingly random lines and interlacing textures had become his signature style by 1950, to such a degree that by 1951 *Vogue* was featuring Pollock's pictures as a backdrop to photographic shots of fashion models.

This was one of the challenges for abstract art: it was easy to appropriate for commercial ends and quickly came to symbolize the 'bad dream of modernism'. There was publicity to be gained, such as the Pollock exposé in *Life* in August 1949, but his art from the late 1940s – 'the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, spontaneous, uncontrolled' – was here juxtaposed with contemporary fashion as a symbol of postwar materialism.[37] In fact, although Pollock was at the height of his fame in the early 1950s, arguably his most creative work was behind him by 1951.

The study of Hofmann and Stella in the previous section might suggest that abstraction continued to be the *modus operandi* of 1950s

art, but what distinguished it from practices in the late 1940s was a return to 'the figure'. For some artists the shift away from abstraction was marked: for example, the artists in the Bay Area of San Francisco in the early decade used paint in the same way as the abstract expressionists but focused on figurative subject-matter, and even Pollock returned to recognizable objects and figures after 1951.[38]

By the middle of the decade, and especially following the death of Pollock in 1956, it was thought that the aims of abstract artists had become vague and certain styles were becoming hackneyed. One sign of this is Howard Devree's worry in April 1955 that avant-garde art is always at risk:

> the inherent danger of extremism is that, if it is not to solidify as an academy of extremism at some point, it must go on being more extreme to hold attention. This is all too likely to result in novelty rather than true originality.[39]

While certain abstract artists, such as Seattle-based painter Mark Tobey and even the European-influenced Robert Motherwell, were finding fresh influences in Japanese and East Asian art, others were realizing that a new direction was needed. The fact that a six-year-old chimpanzee, Betsy, at Baltimore Zoo had her own one-chimp show of abstract art in spring 1957 is a sign that novelty had taken over from serious experimentation. Strangely enough one of the formative figures in the development of abstract art, Marcel Duchamp, was also behind the wave of artists in the mid-1950s who redefined the terms of painterly abstraction. There were other precedents such as Joseph Cornell's ready-mades in the 1940s, which were more 'object' than 'painting', but it was left to the younger artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Claes Oldenburg to forge new links between painting and the social environment.

Rauschenberg had shifted away from the pure abstractions of the early 1950s, many of them untitled, towards creating 3-D assemblages such as the vertical wall-hanging *Bed* (1955) and *Monogram* (1959), which consists of a long-horned goat with a tyre around its middle standing on a square base of abstract art.[40] This odd juxtaposition of objects is distinctly modernist, but Rauschenberg's work moved beyond Dadaist jokes and surrealist dreams into an absurd world shot through with the consumerist impulses of the mid-decade. In 1959 Rauschenberg declared in the 'Sixteen Americans' exhibition that he wanted to reduce the gap between art and life by using manufactured

objects.[41] His assemblages share with Richard Stankiewicz's junk sculptures such as *Warrior* (1952–3) an interest in the detritus of consumerism; the junk left behind in an expendable society geared to keeping things new.

The beginnings of pop art can be identified as early as 1956 with the 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery in London as a showcase for British artists Peter Blake and Richard Hamilton, but the late 1950s are often overlooked or just seen as the forerunner to the more obvious pop art products of the early 1960s: Roy Lichenstein's cartoons, James Rosenquist's murals and Andy Warhol's silkscreens. While Clement Greenberg was all for keeping abstract art as a high cultural form, post-abstract art takes as its materials the symbols and artefacts of popular culture, such as the manner in which Claes Oldenburg made collapsing versions of household fixtures or the removal of items from the home to display as art. There were questions over the legitimacy of this practice. The critic Leo Steinberg, for one, only later realized that Rauschenberg's use of a 'flatbed picture plane' in *Bed* was a 'radically new orientation' shifting its focus from 'nature to culture'.[42]

Oldenburg saw that his generation growing up after World War II had 'the great advantage of getting the material of popular culture firsthand . . . having that material makes a huge difference, even if your attitude is objective or ironic'.[43] In a 1959 symposium on 'New Uses of the Human Image in Painting' in Greenwich Village, Oldenburg suggested that the human form could be rescued without needing to turn back the clock to classical portraiture. Even for painters who attempted to transform abstract experimentation, such as Frank Stella, the gap between serious and decorative art could be closed in creative ways. Turning to popular culture was not a 'giving up' to the market for Oldenburg, but a sign of commitment; art did not have to possess the high seriousness of Newman or de Kooning, but could be playful, clownish or ironic without being derivative. As Oldenburg pronounced in 1961:

> I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top . . . I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and course and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself.[44]

This turn from abstraction was a sure sign that artists were thinking for themselves, rather than waiting for critics, curators or patrons to graft meaning onto their art.

It is easy to lump together all post-abstract work under the label of pop art, or to include it within the context of the following decade as Thomas Crow does in his book *The Rise of the Sixties* (1996). But 1960s pop art had a cleaner image than Rauschenberg's rough assemblages and Oldenburg's plaster casts from the late 1950s, and pop artists did not share the collagist's impulse to recompose different substances. This label also ignores the vitality of American art in the second half of the 1950s: a vitality epitomized by the work of Jasper Johns.

### *Flag* (1954–5)

By the time the twenty-eight year old Jasper Johns held his first solo show in early 1958 he had already helped to shift the parameters of what could be considered a work of art. At that exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York City, Johns displayed recent pieces such as *Book* (a book in a boxed frame over-painted with wax), *Canvas* (a small canvas glued on a larger one, both painted grey) and *Drawer* (the front panel of a drawer appears in a grey painting). Neither of the major art critics of the 1950s, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, had much time for Johns and, even though *Time* was to proclaim a year later that he was 'the brand-new darling of the art world's bright, brittle avant-garde', the general reaction to his 1958 show was that the items on display were humdrum.[45] Some critics could not decide whether his subjects were chosen 'to make them more visible' or more obscure, the pictures evoking 'situations wherein the subjects are constantly found and lost, seen and ignored, submerged and recovered again'.[46] Just as early modernists were interested in making strange commonplace or manufactured objects, so Johns in the second half of the 1950s focused on everyday things which are usually overlooked.

One of Johns's central interests was the way in which objects reveal themselves to have hidden properties if placed in unusual combinations. Sharing similarities with Elizabeth Bishop's poetry (see Chapter 1), Johns's preoccupation was with 'the back' of objects that can only ever be partly revealed in a painting and how straightforward views, on close scrutiny, give way to complexity. These interests stimulated Johns to move away from purely abstract painting to place recognizable objects into peculiar relationship with each other. Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were both accused of creating anti-art because they followed earlier avant-garde artists by trying to reduce the gap between art and life. This technique can also be seen in early surrealist painting and in Marcel Duchamp's Dadaist ready-mades which were to inspire Johns after 1959. But Johns avoided the distortion of the surrealists in favour of a cool and deadpan form of representation which invites the viewer to participate with the painting.

Johns's paintings from the 1950s begin with familiarity, only to leave the viewer feeling puzzled when faced with a series of juxtapositions, fragments and textures that sit uneasily with each other. This is clearly evident in the painting *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), in which a large target of five bold concentric rings in yellow and blue is set against a bright red field topped with a series of boxes containing plaster casts depicting human remains: a hand, a nose, an ear, and other less distinct parts. Viewers literally had to open the boxes to see the plaster casts, bringing them into an intimate and uncomfortable relationship with what lies within. The obvious contemporary reference point here is war – targets and fragmented bodies – but the painting escapes an allegorical reading, by setting the viewer a puzzle that is impossible to solve. For this reason, Mark Rosenthal argues that 'the spectator may come to feel that a work by Johns cannot be fully understood' because it is likely that 'there is yet more which is beyond our view' behind or beyond the painting.[47]

Johns created a series of paintings involving numbers and other signs in the late 1950s, and also turned his hand to sculptures of everyday objects, but the one commonplace image that Johns returned to most often was the American flag. In an early composition of a long-running series, *Flag* (1954–5), the image of the flag works on a number of levels. First, the flag is a flat object that allowed Johns to work within the plane of the picture; second, it is a unified concept incorporating a complex set of geometric relations; and, third, it has a symbolic dimension that changes depending on the context or environment. Art critic Fred Orton reads Johns's approach to objects such as targets and flags as 'undecidables': the created painting is neither one thing nor another, but sits uncomfortably in a mid-zone between pure abstraction and cultural reference. On this reading the flag is both a series of geometric shapes in which the 'flagness' has been eradicated, but also a representation of the Stars and Stripes with all its symbolic and historical resonances. Johns always maintained that the initial idea for painting the American flag came to him in a dream he had in 1954 and four year later he was claiming that he had no idea 'about what the [flag] paintings imply about the world', simply that he 'intuitively like[d] to paint flags'.[48] But, by 1960, Johns seemed to confirm Orton's reading of his piece as both flag and painting, asserting that 'both positions are implicit in the paintings, so you don't have to choose'.[49]

While Flag works primarily on a two-dimensional plane it is also a highly textured work made out of a painted collage of torn newspaper pasted with hot wax on fabric and then mounted on plywood. Johns was to replicate this collage technique for *Target with Plaster Casts* but, on close inspection, the white stripes of *Flag* reveal the random articles which Johns has torn up to create its texture. None of the pasted newspaper pieces refer directly to contemporary headlines; instead they offer a mosaic of textuality that leads the viewer beyond iconic recognition to conflicting stories that were often overlooked in the cold war climate. As such, the total meaning of the flag is maintained, but the details betray its 'flagness'. As Fred Orton notes, the forty-eight stars are not identical, the red and white

stripes do not conform to a standard figure–ground relationship, and 'in some places drips and dribbles of wax cross the edge of stars and stripes and link various areas as surface'.[50]

The initial flag painting led to a series of others running into the 1990s, including in his early phase *Flag above White with Collage* (1955), the massive *White Flag* (1955) in which the stars and stripes lack colour and are only faintly discernible, *Green Flag* (1956), *Flag on Orange Field* (1957), and a year later *Three Flags* with three flags of decreasing size sitting on top of each other. Each of these flags offers surprising juxtapositions of shapes, colours and textures, and force the viewer to approach the national symbol in different ways. *White Flag*, for example, is a ghostly negative of the Stars and Stripes, making the flag itself distinctly non-American, while *Three Flags* (for which the Whitney Museum paid $1 million in 1980) displays eighty-four stars – the inverse of forty-eight states – and three overlapping series of stripes that makes it difficult to find a place for the eye to rest.

It is difficult to know how Johns's early aesthetics developed as he reputedly destroyed all his pre-1955 work. Some critics see his compositions from the late 1950s simply as a series of experiments with shapes and colour fields: Max Kozloff, for instance, in 1973 claimed that it is dubious whether the flag series can be seen as 'derisory in any social sense' because 'the possibilities of the sardonic were limited in a country whose youth . . . was oriented to scientific careerism'.[51] Johns's refusal to make social comment ('I'm interested in things . . . rather than in judgments' Johns claimed) is one of the reasons why Kozloff reads him as a pure formalist, but this is to overlook the context of production.[52] It is no accident that Eisenhower had called for patriotism and loyalty to the American flag in his Flag Day speech of 1954. From this perspective *Flag* provides indirect commentary on the unease that marginalized groups felt towards national symbols – a mode of social critique which Johns revisited with further flags in the series during the 1980s when cold war fears returned.[53]

## Photography in Search of America

If 1950s painting is best characterized as a development from the New York school of abstract art, then photography in the 1950s is a more eclectic phenomenon and harder to classify. This is partly because photography had been thoroughly commercialized by mid-century, largely due to the growth of print media during the 1940s. Newspapers like the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver specialized in hardball journalism and featured regular photographer Morey Engle with his pictures of 'fires, plane crashes, train wrecks, gangland killings, floods, and other natural disasters', as well as more familiar photographs of automobiles, recreation, and celebrities visiting Colorado.[54] While newspaper photography was on the rise, and the emergence of new

**Figure 5.1** Jasper Johns, Flag (1954–5), encaustic, oil and collage on fabric mounted on plywood. © DACS, 2005.

magazines like *Ebony* in 1945 provided work for African American photographers, journalistic photography was required to be dramatic and illustrative, but largely at the service of print news. The lowly status of photographers meant the landscape photographer Ansel Adams was forced to earn a living working on portraits, publicity, industrial reports and catalogues, fulfilling assignments for *Life* magazine that took him away from his passion for the natural landscape.

Photojournalism was very much in demand as newspaper and magazine editors tried to entice readers away from the lures of television. There were more immediate ideological implications for photojournalism in the early 1950s though. At a time when Joseph McCarthy was resorting to doctored photographs for propagandist ends, the development of magazine photography by the likes of Robert Capa, Alfred Eisenstaedt and Loomis Dean helped shift the journalistic emphasis from a written to a visual medium, although the powerful exposé *Black Like Me* (1962) by journalist John Howard Griffin, who darkened the colour of his skin in 1959 to investigate race relations in the Deep South, revealed new possibilities for print journalism.[55] But while some photographers specialized in war images and others balanced personal interests and commercial assignments,

photography did not have the clear social purpose it had during Depression and World War II.

W. Eugene Smith stands out among magazine journalists for managing to retain individual expressiveness in his photographic essays. Smith had worked for *Life* briefly before the war and he returned again in 1948 where he helped to refine the idea of the photo-essay in *Nurse Midwife* (1951), showing the role of black midwives in South Carolina, and *A Man of Mercy* (1954), which focuses on Albert Schweitzer's humanitarian work in French Equatorial Africa.[56] Smith was never hostile towards *Life* but he found assignments very prescriptive and was unhappy about who owned the images. This led him to resign in 1954 after the Schweitzer story to focus on private projects such as his studies of Pittsburgh and Haiti. But, despite the restrictions of working for a magazine, photojournalism did offer opportunities for travelling to interesting locations, as evidenced by the pictures Smith took of the South Carolina branch of the Ku Klux Klan on a trip there for *Life* in 1951.[57] Similarly, the Budapest-born Robert Capa was known for his combat images during World War II, but he extended his range after the war working for *Life*, by mixing photography of Hollywood icons (Gene Kelly, Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman) with location photographs from Paris, Japan and Indochina.[58]

Because the power of images in the 1950s was so intense, it is often easy to conflate photographic event and aesthetic process. For this reason Alan Trachtenberg, writing in 2001 for 'The Tumultuous Fifties' exhibition, focused on 'the relation between raw fact, which photographs are often thought to represent, and some principle of order, some way of cooking the raw into digestible form'.[59] Another way of putting this is that although photography is a powerful means for documenting history, it is itself subject to historical and aesthetic forces beyond its visual range. From this perspective postwar photographers were as much (but perhaps in a more indirect way) influenced by modernist ideas as painters were. Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand's interest in form in their 'straight photography' of the 1910s and 1920s was not as evident in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the founding of *Aperture* magazine in 1952 under the editorship of Minor White, who was passionate about developing the art of photography, was one indication that photographers were still interested in formal experimentation. In fact, just as Smith's and Capa's photography documented the changing social climate so they continued to work with strains of abstract modernism, alongside others like the Chicago-based Aaron Siskind who was keen to work in the interstices between

abstract and figurative photography, such as in his lyrical study of falling human bodies, the *Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation* series which he began in 1954.[60]

One example of a photographer who tried to negotiate a space beyond modernism is Ansel Adams. He had been introduced to modernist art in the late 1920s, encountering the New York modernism of Stieglitz but also the mix of Indian, Hispanic and Euro-American traditions that had led Stieglitz's partner Georgia O'Keeffe and Paul Strand to test out their urban training in the rural Southwest. Adams found 'raw, elemental nature' in his trips to New Mexico and California which inspired him to move away from a pictorialist technique to seek a 'simplified, geometric graphic organization' of primitive forms.[61] Although the interest in abstraction carried into Adams's postwar photography and took on new aspects as he visited different areas – waterfalls in Yosemite, sand in Oleano, rocks in Big Sur, aspen trees in New Mexico, Buddhist graves in Hawaii – his regionalist sensibility was in tension with the international abstract style. Adams was annoyed by the brash proclamations of the abstract expressionists and depressed by the West Coast school; he could detect only European influences in their work and little evidence of the eclectic cultural mix that he had encountered in the Southwest twenty years earlier.

Despite this distancing from avant-garde painting, Adams continued to work within a modernist tradition. He was always aware that a photographer risks the 'danger of becoming repetitive', and he placed great emphasis on visual perspective for animating 'geometric shapes or faces' that may otherwise be overlooked.[62] He was extremely interested in the process of photography, but was modernist in his emphasis on psychology, beginning all three of his photographic manuals with a section on the technique of 'visualization'. Adams argued that the composition of a photograph begins before the shutter is released; the artist should cultivate an intuitive response to the environment which, given the right conditions, will conjure up 'expressive images' beyond the power of words.[63] This stance is very different from the artisan or newspaper photographer and links Adams's interests to that of the early twentieth-century modernist photographers Stieglitz and Strand.

Where Adams fits uncomfortably in the climate of 1950s photojournalism was his social commitment to conservationism. One could make connections between Adams and Jackson Pollock in their interest in Native American culture, but Adams's ecological sensibility strained against the pure painting that the likes of Pollock and

Hofmann were striving for at the turn of the 1950s.[64] The eco-friendly Sierra Club even published Adams's 1959 exhibition 'This is the American Earth', stimulated by reports that new roads were to open up Yosemite to ever more tourists. Ironically Adams's photographs have often been used to encourage business to Yosemite, but his intention was not that of the tourist photographer. His twin purpose was to capture the sublime aspects of nature and to preserve natural beauty which could only be glimpsed in special moments, early in the morning or when the light fell in a particular way. There is something universal about his images: they are deeply rooted in locality, but echo nineteenth-century landscape painters and the spirituality of Walt Whitman's Romantic poetry (one of Adams's and Paul Strand's favourite poets).

This same impulse to universalize experience was a driving force behind the most famous photography show of the 1950s. 'The Family of Man' exhibition was curated by Director of Photography at MoMA, Edward Steichen, and opened in January 1955 after three years of preparation. Unlike the contemporary trend for photojournalism, the 503 photographs in the exhibition (selected from over 2 million submissions) did not attempt to tell a narrative, but offered vignettes of contemporary life in all its diversity. That the exhibition did not feature a small circle of photographic names, but spanned 274 photographers from 68 countries, was due to Steichen's tendency to theme photographic exhibitions at MoMA (rather than focusing on particular artists) as evident in three exhibitions he curated in 1951 on the Korean War, on abstract photography, and on French photographers, as well as the 'Diogenes with a Camera' exhibitions which ran for four years from 1952.

Steichen was in his seventies when he began working on 'The Family of Man' and represented an older generation of photographers in which the photograph as social document had priority over aesthetics. He was acquainted with Alfred Stieglitz in the 1910s, but had more of a commercial leaning and was less interested in photographic theory than Adams. Others shared Adams's criticism of Steichen's populism, but Steichen had a high social standing following his work on the 'Century of Progress' exhibition at the 1933 Chicago World Fair, producing glamour and fashion shots in the 1930s, and being promoted to captain during armed service in World War II. Steichen was particularly taken by the success of photography to resist becoming '"frozen" into philosophy or ideology or system of aesthetics'.[65] Although he was of no particular

political persuasion, within the cold war context 'The Family of Man' can be read as an anticommunist exhibition, pitting diversity, freedom and creativity against dogma and rigid ideology. These sentiments can be glimpsed through the photographs, collected into groups under the themes of birth, death, justice and peace, and accompanied by texts ranging from Shakespeare, Thomas Paine and James Joyce to the Bible, Maori and Sioux sayings, and the founding statement of the United Nations. The poet Carl Sandburg (Steichen's brother-in-law) amplified Steichen's central theme of human diversity in his evocation of the 'grand canyon of humanity' for the exhibition catalogue.[66]

Critics have seized upon 'The Family of Man' as a symbol of cold war liberal anticommunism: Jonathan Green claims that the exhibition is now generally thought to have been a 'romantic, sententious, and sentimental' form of 'mass-culture spectacle', and feminist thinker Donna Haraway has criticized the way in which it not only universalizes American ideas but turns heterosexuality, monogamy and childrearing into 'essential' experiences.[67] However, these views do not detract from the importance of the exhibition in opening up photography to an international audience, touring in forty-two countries and seen by ten million visitors. It is easy to read the travelling exhibition as an example of the flexing of US cultural muscle abroad, but its diversity and combination of image and text reveals its creative intent in developing the scope of the photo-essay.

As this discussion has suggested, if 1950s photographers had learnt their craft by fusing ideas drawn from the documentary tradition of the 1930s with the formal aesthetic concerns of 1920s modernism, then the end results were not always easy to predict. 'The Family of Man' exhibition can be seen as the triumph of American freedom recast within an international context, but other photographers like Richard Bagley and Mark Sufrin, who collaborated with director Lionel Rogosin in the experimental New York film *On the Bowery* (1956), were interested in exploring the underbelly of 1950s consumerism. The automobile might have been the most photographed image of the decade and a symbol of middle-class aspiration, but that did not prevent isolation and frustration arising as by-products of an economic machine geared to promoting middle-class aspiration. One photographer who epitomized this alternative focus on social fallout was Swiss émigré Robert Frank.

## *The Americans* (1958)

Arguably the most important photographic document of mid-century America was not published in the United States until a year after its first release in 1958, because according to artist Robert Frank it was deemed to be un-American, 'dirty, overexposed, crooked'.[68] *The Americans* was compiled from a series of pictures that Frank took during his journey across the country between 1954 and 1956 in his desire to study the outlying and overlooked corners of the United States. Although photographers were responding to a different set of concerns to painters in the 1950s, Frank shared with Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg a desire to work in the gap between art and life. Rather than seeing photography as a simple record of social habits or a special sphere sealed off from contemporary culture, Frank wanted to create photographs that glimpsed underlying forces beyond the aesthetic frame.

Frank had only been in the United States for eight years following his emigration from Switzerland in 1947 at the age of twenty-two. He initially worked as a fashion photographer for *Harper's Bazaar* at the end of the 1940s (although he admits that fashion was not his forté) and in the early 1950s he spent periods of time taking pictures in West Europe, particularly Paris (1949–53), London (1951–3) and Wales (1953). This strong European attachment gave Frank an outsider's view of his adopted country, but also a perspective that he felt attuned him to individuals living in its hinterlands and outlying regions.[69] His trip across America was sponsored by two Guggenheim fellowships, and he left New York hoping to produce an 'authentic contemporary document' of his new nation: 'it was the first time I had seen this country, and it was the right mood' he later claimed.[70]

When the eighty-three images appeared as *Les Américans* in Paris two years later, the 'hidden violence' that Frank detected in the faces of his subjects as he travelled across the country revealed a dark underside to the consumerist promises of the decade. In the preface to the US edition, Jack Kerouac (who had travelled with Frank) highlighted the 'EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness' of Frank's pictures, yet one reason why *The Americans* was lambasted by critics for being non-American (or even un-American) was that it is hard to find national precedents or direct influences on Frank. He was inspired by the non-conformity of the abstract expressionists, but as a recent immigrant his work did not fit in with any established photographic tradition and, despite links to the Beat writers Kerouac, Ginsberg and Corso, he usually worked alone. This was perhaps the major reason that *Life* turned down Frank's American pictures and why he became increasingly suspicious of magazines that demanded photographs with well-defined styles and clear subjects.

The dignity and courage evident in the Depression photographs of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans seem to be in stark contrast to the disconsolate figures that Frank captured. Evans did help Frank in gaining his Guggenheim award, but the critical consensus up to the early 1980s was

that the two photographers were polar opposites: Frank rejected 'the static, frontal approach' of Evans by focusing on the edge of the photograph and 'the world outside of the picture's limits'.[71] However, in an effort to question this critical consensus, a 1981 exhibition at Yale University juxtaposed images from *The Americans* with Walker Evans's *American Photographs* (1938). Although the mood of the two collections is in sharp contrast, there are some very interesting compositional parallels which support the claim that *American Photographs* provided 'an iconographical sourcebook' for Frank's pictures.[72] Certainly the two can be seen as shadow images of each other; 'Frank's world of the mid-fifties is Walker Evans's world of the mid-thirties stood on end and plunged into the quiet desperation of existential America', as critic Jonathan Green describes.[73]

Frank explained that his interest in moving away from still photography to sequential images stemmed from his modernist desire to push the photographic medium in new directions. The photographic book forces the artist to think in 'long durations' and encourages a blurring of cultural forms: 'the picture that has the television set in it', as Frank claimed in 1977.[74] He was interested in the aesthetics of photography, not just in terms of visualization but also the way in which a single still image fits into a wider cultural pattern. Frank steered away from beautiful compositions because beauty often prevents viewers from thinking about broader social implications; this means that a photograph that may not be perfectly composed can resonate with messages from beyond its frame.[75] As Kerouac did in his prose and Johns in his painting, Frank linked photography to life in all its complexity.

One example of this technique can be found in the opening photograph of *The Americans*. The image 'Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey' (1955) depicts two women in adjacent windows with the American flag flying between them. It is an unremarkable image in many ways, but one which is rich with meaning. Frank's title is ironic as the photograph does not represent a parade. Instead, like Jasper Johns's *Flag* from the same year, 'Parade' defamiliarizes the Stars and Stripes to create a disjunction between the patriotism it is meant to inspire and the isolation of the two women, cut off from each other and the symbol of national pride. One face is mask-like and almost inhuman as the half-closed blind casts it into deep shadow, while the other head is completely obliterated by the fluttering flag. Instead of an uplifting sense of celebration, the American flag here becomes a symbol of division and decapitation.

Reacting to the sentimentality that Frank saw embodied in 'The Family of Man' exhibition, in 'Parade' and other pictures in *The Americans* – empty motel rooms, backyards and gas stations, blank faces turned away in indifference or torment, lost in isolation and inferiority – he displays his interest in what he later called 'disturbing objects which have a tale to tell or just lie low mutely'.[76] *The Americans* does not tell a story, nor is it dramatic as conventional photojournalism was supposed to be, but instead it evokes a series of subdued emotions and troubling environments. Because Frank turned to filmmaking in the late 1950s, many critics see a proto-filmic

quality in *The Americans*. This also links with Frank's later sense that a single perspective cannot reach beyond the surface of objects; what he sought was a 'dialogue between the movement of the camera and the freezing of a still image, between the present and the past, inside and outside, front and back'.[77]

Frank was not a political photographer in the 1950s in the sense that he toed a party line, but neither was he a pure formalist. The series of photographs he took of the 1956 Democratic National Convention in Chicago epitomized his belief that the photographer should strive after social truth whatever its ideological implications: the American flag appears casually in a couple of images of the Convention, while others defamiliarize the paraphernalia of party politics. Politics comes in many different forms and *The Americans* turns away from the mystique of Hollywood culture to focus on the low-lying everyday experience of most US citizens.[78] As such, *The Americans* is far from a classically well-crafted photography book; instead in its form and subject matter it highlights regional eclecticism and the different idioms that Frank observed on his travels.

**Figure 5.2** Robert Frank, 'Parade – Hoboken, New Jersey', gelatin-silver print (1955). © Robert Frank.

## Multimedia and the Avant-Garde

Some of the most interesting practices in 1950s visual culture were hybrid activities, where different media were held in tension with each other – what Susan Sontag has described as the 'recombinant arts'.[79] As

we have seen, this tendency was also evident in other forms (music, performance and a certain strain of film culture) in which an experimental tendency kicked against the dead centrism that can be seen to characterize the Top 40 format and mainstream Broadway and Hollywood productions. But it was left to the visual arts to break new ground after the mid-1950s, and a diverse group of artists whose experiments with form and technique were to have a profound influence on the counterculture of the mid-1960s.

In this vein the collaborative book *Cage – Cunningham – Johns: Dancers on a Plane* (1990) focuses on the links between three of the most distinctive mid-century artists: musician John Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham and painter Jasper Johns. The book is less concerned with their long-lasting friendship than their experiments with music, dance and art that helped to transform postwar culture. Cage and Cunningham (who had met in Seattle in 1938) were eighteen and eleven years older than Johns and frequent visitors to the Black Mountain College in the late 1940s and early 1950s, where artist Robert Rauschenberg encouraged their avant-garde practice in the form of Cage's silent musical piece *4′33″* (1952) and Cunningham's dance work *Suite for Five in Time and Space* (1956).

Even though the generation of Johns, Warhol, Lichenstein, Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, Frank Stella and Edward Ruscha were just beginning their careers in the 1950s, it is reductive to see the decade's avant-gardism merely as a precursor to the flourishing of experimentalism in the 1960s, rather than an entity in its own right. Older artists like Cage and Cunningham were not alone as innovators, with photographer Robert Frank, performer Ken Dewey and filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Bruce Conner creating very imaginative work in the 1950s. Although an artist like Robert Motherwell worked in almost pure abstraction through the decade, his paintings such as the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series suggest a social reality beyond the canvas. What these artists have in common is a rejection of the idea that art can be pure and freed from its environment – an idea at the heart of the experiments at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s and in the art department at Rutgers University, New Jersey in the last third of the decade.[80]

'Is our eye dying?' exclaimed Jonas Mekas, champion of underground film and founder of the *Film Culture* journal in 1955. Writing in his movie journal for the *Village Voice* Mekas argued that the emphasis on technical culture and seductive consumer images, linked to the speed of social change since World War II (what Mekas called

the 'flash-and-glimpse reality'), prevented many individuals from looking long and attentively.[81] As an antidote Mekas found in short experimental films an expression of the 'total art' which Allan Kaprow had outlined in 1958: the viewers 'enter, are surrounded, and become part of what surrounds us'.[82] Whereas Kaprow focused on performance art, Mekas looked to the flicker techniques of Stan Brakhage's films from the 1950s to disrupt continuity of vision and leave the viewer feeling disorientated and very often with a headache. Mekas realized that mainstream cinema was also undergoing a period of experimentation, but he detected a major difference: 'the experience of Cinerama' is 'a circus feeling' of being dazzled by technology, Mekas claimed, whereas avant-garde filmmakers were looking to capture 'a new spiritualized language of motion and light'.[83]

By the mid-1960s this 'new spirtualized language' was closely linked to psychedelic culture, but Mekas saw precursors in the Beat movement of the 1950s which gave film a 'new glow' and 'trickle[d] little drops of uncomfortable poison into the fat and plump veins of our commercial cinema'.[84] Some critics have argued that experimental filmmaking was at a low ebb in the 1950s; even Mekas protested in 1959 that short films had become 'sterile' and 'frozen' into generic patterns and Dwight Macdonald was complaining in 1962 that 'art film' rarely rises above 'corny avant-gardism'.[85] However, the *New York Times* was regularly detailing releases on the 16mm film circuit and societies such as the Cinema 16 Club were exhibiting world cinema in New York, as well as hosting events such as the October 1953 symposium on Poetry and the Film (featuring Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Maya Deren and Parker Tyler), showing screenings of group therapy sessions, and showcasing experimental films by the likes of Brakhage, Conner, Kenneth Anger, Joseph Cornell and John Cassavetes which gave new poetic depth to the medium.[86]

Mekas was particularly interested in the way these new forms were born out of cultural exchanges; but rather than from Europe, it was to China, Japan, Indonesia and India that he thought the most creative impulses were stemming. One example of this is a 3-minute animation *Dwightiana* (1959) by collagist Marie Menken who shared with British-born animator Norman McLaren an interest in the dynamic inner life of objects. In *Dwightiana* animated objects continually form, dissolve and reform in rhythm to Tokyo-born musician Teiji Ito's Asian score. Mekas detected in Asian cultures holistic practices in which reality and fantasy, arts and sciences, technics and aesthetics, process and product were not held in opposition, but crossed over in

creative ways as exemplified by Menken's cinematic collage.[87] Instead of rigid cold war dichotomies Mekas looked for border-crossings and transgressions.

One of these border-crossings can be seen in Robert Frank's first experiment with film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), made in collaboration with Alfred Leslie and Jack Kerouac, who wrote the script for the 28-minute film. Some critics have noted that Frank was thinking as a filmmaker well before he turned to film, and some shots are reminiscent of *The Americans*.[88] But Kerouac's narration and the figures of Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso drinking and smoking contrast with the beginnings of a domestic story about a working couple and their son. Kerouac starts his narrative: 'Early morning in the universe' – a phrase that suggests themes which are both exceptional and mundane. Frank's film is tactile but also cool in its depiction of Greenwich Village bohemia; it is spontaneous yet strangely staged; it is dynamic in the poetic range of Kerouac and the peculiar antics of Ginsberg and Corso, but also frieze-like in its photographic lingering on faces and gestures. The visual rhythm of the film seems deliberately uneven as it jars with Kerouac's jazz modulations. *Pull My Daisy* recalls early-century modernist experiments in film, but with an added sense that, like Frank's *The Americans*, the search for America lies in everyday activities and those spaces overlooked by consumer culture.

This avant-garde eclecticism was also exciting for the short-filmmakers Bruce Conner and Stan Brakhage (the first born in Kansas, the second Missouri, both in 1933) who began making films in the late 1950s that revolutionized the experience of viewing. Conner and Brakhage were fascinated with perception and the ways in which a film can leave the viewer with after-images. 16mm film stock aided their exploration of subjective viewpoints, montage, discontinuous narratives and the interplay of light and image. As with the painting of Jasper Johns, their work is both abstract and representational. Shapes, objects and figures take on new forms which push the viewer beyond conventional reference points and knowledge of what a particular image means. It is easy to see them as rebellious artists, but given the dominant discourse of containment, Conner's and Brakhage's early work is particularly interesting as it suggests that freedom and containment are closely related: 'free moving changing form isn't free. It's always contained in something, but every containment is another free flowing form in another containment'.[89]

Despite having a fairly conventional orchestral score (Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome*) and the feel of a motion picture, Conner's *A*

*Movie* (1958, 12 minutes) completely disrupts the narrative sequence of events; 'THE END' flashes up periodically through film and the title 'A MOVIE' and Conner's name also cuts between images. Premiering at the East/West Gallery in San Francisco, *A Movie* has been described as a 'high density narrative' and a pastiche of Hollywood.[90] It is composed piecemeal from old film footage and newsreels, but any sense of narrative pattern soon dissolves as Conner makes fast cuts between high-tempo car crashes, cowboy chases, collapsing bridges, war imagery and atom-bomb footage, punctuated by arresting images of alluring women, urban tightrope walkers, exotic and starving Africans, the death of an elephant, and a diver swimming into an underwater wreck. *A Movie* is the best example of what has been described as Conner's interest in sifting through the junkyard of American history to recombine 'familiar imagery . . . into richly provocative puzzles that rhythmically prod the viewer to attempt reconciliations of ambiguity with the obvious and the comic with the horrific'.[91] As with Robert Frank, ambivalence and irony characterize Conner's work, but also an intense subjectivism (aided by Conner's interest in the psychedelic drug peyote) that gives back to the viewer a degree of interpretative freedom and the chance to (metaphorically) swim into the wreck of America.

Inspired by the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, Brakhage was drawn to similar montage techniques as Conner. Many of his films intermingle objects and persons, such as *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959, 12 minutes) which intercuts intimate close-ups of his first wife Jane and the home birth of their child with images taken before the birth, and *Cat's Cradle* (1959, 6 minutes) in which he used a red filter and an accelerating rhythm to convey a family scene – techniques which foreshadow the psychedelic films of the mid-1960s. Although Brakhage's most distinctive films were made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he started filmmaking earlier in the decade than Conner. In one of his earliest films, *Desistfilm* (1954, 6 minutes), Brakhage foreshadows *Pull My Daisy* in presenting a domestic episode of young adults playing instruments, smoking, drinking and generally enjoying themselves. Like *Cat's Cradle*, but shot in monochrome, *Desistfilm* soon becomes frenetic and the activities more random. The faces of the group flit between joy, pleasure, desire, mania, fear and bewilderment. The group is together in a room, but the individuals are isolated from each other: one is shaken violently in a sheet and then chased outside, while the silhouette of an embracing couple is disturbed by the manic face of a young man. The distorted music works in tandem with the

series of cropped images: rarely are faces presented in their entirety, and a number of blurring devices are deployed to disrupt the viewer's continuity of vision.

These films are just a few examples of a number that were made in the 1950s, such as Kenneth Anger's classical/psychedelic fusion *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) and the contemplative 35-minute film *The End* (1953) by San Francisco poet and editor Christopher Maclaine, which uses intercut sequences and an existential voiceover to trace the last days of five despairing individuals, beginning and ending with a nuclear explosion. These examples, and other films by Brakhage, suggest that avant-garde film culture continued strongly from the 1940s, and that the rejection of Hollywood techniques began earlier in the decade than is often credited.

Certainly by end of the 1950s experimental filmmaking had formed a vanguard, as confirmed in 1960 with the inauguration of the (albeit short-lived) New American Cinema Group which aspired to the same status as Off Broadway productions (see Chapter 2).[92] Rather than avant-garde filmmakers working in a pure medium, some like Christopher Maclaine had no formal training and others like Bruce Conner worked among West coast Beat writers and artists, switching between drawing, sculpture and assemblage with a particular interest in manufactured objects and junk. This interest in assemblage was first brought to public attention in William Seitz's exhibition 'The Art of Assemblage' at MoMA in 1961 and also characterized the diverse group of artists that became known as Fluxus in the early 1960s.

Finding inspiration in the transatlantic avant-gardism of Marcel Duchamp, the minimalist experiments of John Cage, and Harold Rosenberg's claim in 1952 that abstract painting is part of a performance ('what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event'), Fluxus was a mixed group of artists who moved fluidly between theatre, performance, cinema, music, graphics and poetry.[93] The period 1957–64 was the dominant phase for the thirty or so artists that made up Fluxus, which formally came together at the 'Fluxus Internationale Festspiele Neuester Musik' in Wiesbaden, West Germany, in 1962, with a Fluxus Manifesto released the following year. The American branch of Fluxus was deliberately anti-institutional, performing in small exhibition spaces in Manhattan and San Francisco, but also having bases in Germany and Japan. For them the idea of cultural practice was radically transformed with life and art blurring with each other; on viewing a Fluxus piece, it is impossible to distinguish the object from the viewer's experience of it.

Published material ranged from 'pamphlets and flyers to tablecloths and films; from luxurious, handcrafted furniture to deliberately flimsy throwaways; from vainly ambitious commercial projects to those that held darkly obscure and personal innuendos'.[94] This may suggest a fracturing of the modernist tradition into the ephemera embraced by pop artists, but it is better to read Fluxus as another maverick modernism that both affirms and rejects the modernist experiment.[95] And while Fluxus, like pop art, really belongs to a study of early 1960s culture, it is important to remember that Allan Kaprow was using the terms 'happening' and 'total art' in 1958 and the genesis of Fluxus (often called 'proto-Fluxus') was in the late 1950s.[96]

Some of the Fluxus artists were collected in *An Anthology*, edited by composer La Monte Young in 1963. Young was another artist from the regions (Idaho, before moving to Los Angeles) inspired by John Cage's Zen minimalism and by other traditions: the electronic music of German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and Gagaku music from India and Japan. *An Anthology*'s title pages were designed by George Maciunas in bold graphic lettering, an indication of the generic hybridity of the book: 'chance operations, concept art, anti-art, indeterminacy, improvisation, meaningless work, natural disasters' in the form of 'plans of action, stories, diagrams, music, dance constructions, poetry, essays, compositions, mathematics'.[97] The anthology is born out of the spirit of eclecticism and genre-bending; many of the pieces defy description and confound any attempt to pigeonhole them.

Much of the work in *An Anthology* is from the early 1960s with entries by John Cage, Yoko Ono and Nam June Paik, but some are from the late 1950s such as the performance pieces George Brecht's 'Card – Piece for Voice' and Dick Higgins's 'Constellation for Five Performers' (both from 1959) – the first is a piece of absurdism and the second printed backwards – together with earlier notebook material by musician Earle Brown from 1952–3 which exemplifies the indeterminate status of the book. Like Brecht's and Higgins's pieces, Brown provides a series of instructions for a musical performance, but the instructions are printed upside down and are explicitly ambiguous: he claims that the performance space can be 'real or illusory' and can 'expand or contract'; the tempo of the music can be 'as fast as possible to as slow as possible'; lines can 'move in either direction'; and the performer can 'either sit and let it move or move through it at all speeds'.[98] Not only is Brown's piece – and *An Anthology* as a whole – an exemplification of what Richard Kostelanetz in his 1968 book calls 'the theatre of mixed means', but

it also has a pedagogical element: to re-educate perception in a period of 'perceptual illiteracy'.[99]

Not all mixed-media art was as radical or off-beat as the artists I have been discussing in this section, but there was certainly a sense, beginning in the early decade and growing towards its end, that stable cultural categories no longer had currency. The pastiche of styles later linked to postmodernism finds its germinal moment in the late 1950s, not just in the realm of art, music and performance, but also in the built environment which had been moving away from the standardization of the International Style of architecture since the middle of the decade with buildings such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, finished in 1956 after thirteen years of planning. It was in other regional urban spaces, rather than the modern cities of New York and Chicago, that this more eclectic modernism was most clearly evident, though, and not only in the sprawling postmodern city of Los Angeles.

As a way of examining these changes to the built environment and public art, it is worth concluding this chapter by focusing on one of the most interesting examples to emerge in the postwar period: the collection of structures, buildings and exhibition spaces that made up the 1962 Seattle World's Fair.

### Seattle World's Fair (1962)

The planning of the Seattle World's Fair began in 1955, spanned the second half of the decade and became increasingly bound up with cold war politics. Initially conceived as a means for renovating a northwestern city that had been slow to develop in the first half of the century, the Fair grew out of a municipal impulse for a new civic centre in Seattle. A seventy-four-acre plot was eventually found to house the development one mile from the city centre, with the plan to commemorate fifty years since the first World's Fair in the Pacific Northwest: the Pacific-Yukon-Alaskan Exposition of 1909. This Fair was an attempt to consolidate a regional identity for one of the newest corners of the continent, particularly the close relationship between logging companies and the natural environment.

The half-centenary World's Fair was also planned to celebrate the culture of the Northwest, taking in Alaska and Hawaii which had both been recently included in the Union, as well as Pacific Rim cultures. Seattle had long been thought of as the New York of the Northwest, but it needed a way of cementing its relationship with Pacific Asia in the way that New York capitalized on its relationship with Europe. This was helped by the development of the 'sister city' programme in the mid-1950s, when Seattle was

paired with Kobe in Japan: the progressive Japanese coastal city featured in the 1957 Marlon Brando film *Sayonara*. But Seattle also needed a media-savvy showcase for demonstrating its ambition to be a world city and 'the gateway to the Orient', as it was called at the time.

One of the reasons that the seven-year planning of the 1962 World's Fair is so interesting is that a cold war narrative overtook the initial plan to celebrate Northwest culture. In large part stimulated by the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, the municipal impulse to regenerate Seattle became increasingly subordinated to the need to present a national vision of the future with science and technology the driving forces.[100] Branded the 'Century 21 Exposition', the Seattle World's Fair was an opportunity to imagine what the country (indeed the world) would be like in the year 2000: 'the Space Age' as it was described in publicity. This is clearly demonstrated in a 1959 book *Century 21 Exposition*, which begins with a rallying cry to 'mark man's progress [in] the years ahead and the miles above'.[101] Although the initial plans were pushed along by city developer Eddie Carlson in 1955, the finances for the Fair were problematic throughout, spiralling up from $15 million to $47 million. Formal sanction for the Fair was not given the official seal until July 1959 by President Eisenhower at the Boeing Flight Center in nearby Boeing Field, when the opening was thought to be only two years away. Although it would be John F. Kennedy who opened the Fair in April 1962, Eisenhower proclaimed that it 'would depict the role of science in modern civilization . . . and contribute to the welfare of all participants by promoting domestic and international commerce and further understanding among peoples through the interchange of scientific and cultural knowledge'. In this statement are echoed the original plans for the Fair, but as the speech goes on the municipal plans are quickly subordinated to a scientific agenda.

As a model the Fair looked to previous Expositions from the 1930s in Chicago, New York City and San Francisco, as well as The Festival of Britain in 1951 which saw the development of the South Bank arts complex on the Thames. Like London, Seattle organizers were keen to represent both high and popular cultural forms at the Fair, but actually the arts were sidelined as publicity focused closely on science and technology. The Fair itself comprised of five main areas: (1) the world of science; (2) the world of Century 21; (3) the world of commerce and industry; (4) the world of entertainment; and (5) the world of art. While the 'worlds' were supposed to be of equal importance, science dominated the agenda, with the primary aim to 'present the role of man in search for truth in science' and to stimulate children's scientific interest.[102] These aims were embodied in the construction of the Pacific Science Center at the centre of the plot. Next to the futuristic 606-foot Space Needle and the Monorail ('the mass transit system of the future' that took visitors on a 90-second ride from the heart of Seattle to the Fair), the gothic architecture of the Science Center, with its six external arched structures surrounded by fountains designed by the Japanese architect Minoru Yamasaki,

epitomized the intention of the Fair to move beyond the corporate architecture that dominated the 1950s.

Together the Science Center and the Space Needle exemplified what the 1962 guidebook called 'the finest of contemporary design' and the embodiment of 'ideas, concepts and materials which may prevail in the 21st century'.[103] While the Space Needle's innovative design and 360-degree revolving restaurant was the Fair's most iconic symbol, Yamasaki's architecture was described in the *New York Herald Tribune* as possessing 'infinite grace and delicacy' of structure, combining 'supreme logic, clarity and order, with incredible elegance and fantasy', and in the *Los Angeles Times* it was compared to the Taj Mahal, Wells Cathedral, the Piazza San Marco and Byzantine temples as 'one of the most beautiful buildings of our time'.[104] Yamasaki's structures were both traditional and modernist, high art and popular, looking back to classical architectural structures but also forward to the surfaceless structures that characterized postmodern architecture in the 1980s.

Compared to Yamasaki's series of intricate architectural structures, the two major art exhibits drawn from American, Canadian and European museums were arguably too concerned with looking back to the beginning of the 1950s; as the journalist Emily Genauer assessed, 'practically everything to be seen in both exhibits is a cliché of the internationally publicized abstract-expressionist movement'.[105] With aesthetic abstraction suggesting the 'end of man' (to recall William Faulkner's 1949 Nobel Prize speech – see Chapter 1), rather than the Fair's theme of 'man in the future reaching for the stars', Genauer was not alone in claiming that the high profile of abstract expressionism was a 'noisy, already moribund aspect of present day painting'. Not all the artists on display received such criticism, though: much praise was lavished on the Seattle-based Mark Tobey's painterly abstractions, and the local Indian art on display was also well received. Nevertheless, compared to the attention given to the Century 21 exhibits, the Fair's cultural showcase seemed anachronistic, not least because film and television were underrepresented, with the exception of the Cinerama production *Journey to the Stars* showing in the Pacific Science Center's US-Boeing Spacearium. For a Fair that aspired to the next century, the cultural sphere seemed to be firmly rooted in the mid-century, with science seen as the supreme artistic enterprise. A film by Charles Eames in the Science Center claimed that the scientist has absorbed the spirit of ennobling art: 'high on the list of perquisites for being a scientist is a quality that defines the rich human being as much as it does the scientist: his ability and his desire to reach out with his mind and his imagination to something outside himself'.[106]

Dubbed in 1987 'The Fair that Made Seattle' by the *Seattle Times*, the city was transformed from a provincial area of 600,000 in the mid-1950s into a major North American city and international business centre, which by the end of the 1980s had been put on the global map with the ongoing success of the Boeing (despite a dip in the mid-1970s) and the emergence of Microsoft. The rival paper the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* used the 1987

celebrations to reassess the World's Fair as marking a closure of 'the age of technological innocence' when the oil crisis and problems of nuclear power were not yet on the horizon.[107] The Seattle World's Fair was deeply rooted in the cultural politics of the 1950s but also marked one of the decade's dramatic closures, ushering in the renewed optimism of the early 1960s (before Kennedy's assassination and the Vietnam War again quashed national optimism) and looking forward to a new frontier beyond modernist culture and technology.

**Figure 5.3** Seattle Space Needle and Pacific Science Center. © Martin Halliwell.

## Conclusion

In the visual arts we can see most clearly the ways in which popular and modernist cultural currents periodically interlinked and broke apart through the decade to reveal some of its major social and political fault-lines. It is tempting to discuss visual culture primarily in terms of the ephemera of 'everyday life', but for visual artists everyday life was not the stable signifier of white middle-class suburbia that is often remembered. In the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Frank, for example, we see complex critiques of the postwar nation, while other artists were eager to combine different national and transnational conditions to explore America's postwar identity, as the case study of the

Seattle World's Fair demonstrates. And, while it is tempting to link abstract expressionism with the hard abstractions of cold war, by the middle of the decade a much more eclectic and maverick set of practices was emerging in painting, photography, multimedia art and the built environment that were to take the material form of American life in new and unexpected directions.

Conclusion

# Rethinking the 1950s

President Eisenhower entered his last year in office by spending New Year's Eve 1959 at the Augusta National Golf Club in the company of William E. Robinson, the Chairman of Coca-Cola, an evening symbolizing the union of politics and business characteristic of Eisenhower's presidency. A Hindu astrologer on Broadway predicted that 1960 would be a 'good year for Nixon, business and science' (he was at least premature about Nixon), and a *New York Times* correspondent debated whether the decade should actually close at midnight on 31 December 1959 or 1960.[1] Taking 1 January 1961 as the beginning of the next decade seems most helpful, ushering in a new Democratic administration and a young president in the White House, the first to be born in the twentieth century as John F. Kennedy reminded voters. There was also some respite from cold war fears, with public opinion expressing the 'cautious hope' that Kennedy would 'find ways of easing East–West tensions', even though the Soviets seemed in triumphant mood at the close of 1960 and Washington was on the verge of severing diplomatic links with communist Cuba.[2]

One could make the case that the 1950s closed before the end of the calendar decade, perhaps in autumn 1957 (the year of McCarthy's death) with the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik 1 which NBC radio announced 'forevermore separated the old from the new' and the Little Rock Central High School controversy which ushered in the major phase of the civil rights movement.[3] Other world events suggest 1957 is a key year. Following the meeting in April 1955 of Asian and African states at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, 1957 saw 'third world' countries emerge from the grip of colonialism when Ghana became the first African nation to declare its independence under the presidency of Kwame Nkrumah: an event celebrated by black thinkers Richard Wright and C. L. R. James as a moment of seismic global

change. This sense of transition was also felt at home by contributors to the 'American Notebook' special issue of *Dissent* from summer 1957, including worries about an economic downswing and the prediction 'that American institutions will presently undergo tremendous dislocations and reorganizations of a more fundamental nature than anything since the seventeenth century'.[4]

If signs of social transition were emerging in 1957, then 1958 seems more significant for breaking new cultural ground in the US with the proliferation of drama Off Broadway, the flourishing of Beat writers on the West Coast and the renaissance in avant-garde performance and graphic art. When deciding on an early end for the decade the danger is simply to fold late 1950s culture into the pop art movement of 1959–62 and the cultural experimentation of the mid-1960s. But *Look* magazine was in no doubt that January 1960 marked the beginning of a new period, claiming that, although cold war fears had not evaporated, 'most Americans today are relaxed, unadventurous, comfortably satisfied with their way of life and blandly optimistic about the future'.[5] Arthur Schlesinger Jr wrote an article for *Esquire* in January 1960 in which he discerned a new 'sense of motion, of leadership, and of hope' in the nation, a sentiment that Kennedy himself echoed in his presidential debates with Nixon nine months later, attacking the political stasis of the 1950s and promising to get 'America moving again'. This sense of motion was not just at the high end of politics either. In January 1961 *Look* magazine ran another feature on 'The Explosive Generation' which detected that young people across the nation were shaking up the complacency of the 1950s: 'the tempo of history has been doubled and redoubled, and social changes that once took decades are now happening over night'.[6]

The historian Mark Lytle makes the case that the long 1960s began as early as 1954 'when the cold war consensus was at its peak' (and did not end, in Lytle's view, until Watergate in 1974), but it would seem that 1960 was merely a prelude to the symbolic beginning of the new decade in 1961.[7] Kennedy's Inaugural Speech looked to both past and future, marking 'an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change'; a new beginning occurred when nineteen-year-old Charlayne Hunter became the first black woman to be accepted as a student at the University of Georgia in January 1961, followed by James Meredith the first black student at the University of Mississippi in October 1962 (after he had earlier being barred); and John Huston's film *The Misfits* marked a clear closure to the 1950s, with its triad of stars Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift making

final screen appearances (Gable died before the film was released and the others were dead soon after) and filming the previous summer in the Nevada desert was very tense with the pending divorce of Monroe and screenwriter Arthur Miller.[8]

Two documents are often cited as marking the transition between the decades: Eisenhower's Farewell Address of 21 January 1961 and the Port Huron Statement on 15 June 1962 by the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) which had formed as a group in 1960. Both documents reappraise the previous decade but also help to mythologize 'the fifties', constructing a semi-fictional period marked by political balance for Eisenhower and social complacency for the SDS.

Eisenhower was in no doubt that his Farewell Address marked the close of the decade, beginning his speech with the line: 'We now stand ten years past the midpoint of a century . . .' His Address famously identified a 'military-industrial complex' and was fearful of the growth of a 'scientific-technological elite' heedless of the consequences of the development of nuclear weapons.[9] Eisenhower's implication here was that the previous decade had been a peaceful time, reinforced by making no direct mention of Korea or McCarthy or to recent US operations in Iran (1953), Lebanon (1958) and Haiti (1959). But he predicted new fears stemming from the relationship between science, technology and the military, with the suggestion that his administration had managed to contain these threats (even though the H-bomb was being developed under his presidency and over a hundred above-ground nuclear tests had taken place in the Nevada desert).[10] The bomb Eisenhower dropped in 1961 was quite different to the one tested in Eniwetok the year that he came into office, but it was almost as potent: he warned of impending catastrophe unless citizens remained alert, vigilant and wary of the misuse of power.

In contrast the Port Huron Statement characterized the 1950s as a time in which many students 'began maturing in complacency' and did not become politicized until late in the decade. The SDS stated that the 'human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism' and 'the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time'.[11] The powerful Port Huron Statement chimed with C. Wright Mills's 'Letter to the New Left' from autumn 1960 to help mobilize grassroots energies, confirming the argument of the *Look* feature that a far-reaching power shift was

occurring on college campuses across the nation – and beyond it, with Martinique psychiatrist Frantz Fanon sensing that a whole number of colonies were ready to spring free from the 'motionless' grip of their colonial masters.[12] The *Look* feature claimed that the maturing baby-boomers in the US were willing to strive for the 'unattainable' to avoid the 'unimaginable' of nuclear annihilation.

The early 1960s is a key moment for reassessing the previous decade, but the re-imagining of the 1950s was happening well before the decade was officially over, with critics on both the Right and Left deploring the complacency that Irving Howe had popularized in his essay 'The Age of Conformity'. This 'bleak atmosphere of conformism' led to the launch of Howe's leftist (but anti-Stalinist) journal *Dissent* in 1954 and, on the other end of the political spectrum, a few months afterwards the right-winger William F. Buckley Jr founded the *National Review*.[13] Buckley deplored apathy on college campuses and his 1959 book *Up from Liberalism* laid the intellectual groundwork for the rise of the New Right in the guise of the Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, the previously liberal actor Ronald Reagan, and the grass-roots organization Young Americans for Freedom.[14]

If some thinkers, writers and artists were probing the veneer of the 1950s before it was over, then the early 1960s saw the emergence of a number of critiques that became very familiar later in the decade. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (both 1963) questioned dominant gender roles and Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road* and Claes Oldenburg's 3D assemblages stripped away the sheen from consumer lifestyles. Perhaps the most influential critique of the 1950s was Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) which brought to the fore 'invisible' unskilled workers, migrant farmhands, the elderly, ethnic minorities and 'all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life'.[15] Harrington's thesis was that, although the middle classes were prospering in the 1950s, poor communities were 'shabby and defeated' with towns and slums 'permeated with failure'. Such was the power of Harrington's critique – 'the new poverty is constructed so as to destroy aspiration; it is a system designed to be impervious to hope' – that many commentators believed it influenced Lyndon Johnson's anti-poverty campaigns of the mid-1960s.[16]

Naturalized images of mid-1950s culture were also being tested with only a few years hindsight. In 1960 filmmaker Kenneth Anger wrote *Hollywood Babylon*, his scandalous book on the seedy underside of the film industry, while Andy Warhol's mass-market silkscreen prints have

often been interpreted as a simultaneous celebration and critique of the fame industry. Warhol's series of popular icons culminated in his exhibition in the Stable Gallery, New York, in November 1962, where his *Marilyn* diptych (in homage to the recent death of Marilyn Monroe) took its place beside images of mass production: *100 Soup Cans*, *1000 Coke Bottles* and *100 Dollar Bills*. Monroe is made more enigmatic through Warhol's bold lines, but the humanity of the actress formerly known as Norma Jean Baker is also stripped bare, leaving a set of easily recognizable but alienating images in which cosmetically brightened hair, lips and eyebrows become the sole defining features.

Warhol was not alone in such pursuits and it is interesting that Monroe, following her mysterious death in August 1962, became a synecdoche of the previous decade. One example is Marty Greenbaum's artist's book *Park Place Position* (1962) which breaks a sequence of almost pure abstractions with a cut-out of Monroe, her head cocked over her right shoulder smiling seductively surrounded by a dark blue halo preserving her celebrity status, only for her right arm to be partially obscured by a piece of cellotape to which is attached some gold cord that twines randomly over this and the facing page. The line drawing of Monroe stands out starkly in the dense colours and textures that fill the two facing pages, with Greenbaum's use of crayon, charcoal and burnt page edges giving the book an unkempt and almost exhausted feel. Monroe's image is echoed in the stars that fill the page, the magazine cut-outs of angel's faces, a silhouetted angel made from foil, and a series of intersecting celestial circles, but these sit uncomfortably with signs of inclement weather and the handwritten words 'biRD FLIGHt'. Monroe is not just a dead icon here, or the celebrity image in Warhol's silkscreen prints; rather, she is part of the swirl of chaotic images that spiral away from meaning into a collage of social and cultural debris.[17]

The complexity verging on randomness of Greenbaum's collage is a useful metaphor for the 1950s: a decade that looks calm and uncomplicated from a distance, but at close range throws up a series of puzzling contradictions. This book has traced the theme of historical and cultural experience in and of the 1950s, but in the early twenty-first century a number of exhibitions, films and memoirs have renewed interest in the decade: fifty-year commemorations of *Brown* v. *the Board of Education* (2004), the polio vaccine (2005), the opening of Disneyland and McDonald's (both 2005) and the launch of Sputnik (2007), have renewed interest in the founding moment when the US 'first thought seriously of itself as the modern society'.[18]

**Figure C.1** Seattle billboard celebrating fifty years since the first McDonald's restaurant opened, in Des Plaines, Illinois in 1955. © Martin Halliwell, 2005.

## Nostalgia and Cultural Memory

In 1998 the journalist and long-term NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw popularized the phrase 'the greatest generation' to describe those born around 1920 who spent much of the 1940s in uniform. Brokaw hailed the men and women who fought in World War II as 'a generation birthmarked for greatness . . . of towering achievement and modest demeanor'.[19] Nostalgia for combat generations is nothing new and Brokaw's tribute to 'the greatest generation' carefully steers away from the devastating consequences of the dropping of the atom bomb over Hiroshima and the racism that Norman Mailer believed to be rife in Pacific combat during World War II (as depicted in his 1948 war novel *The Naked and the Dead*). Brokaw was twenty years younger than those he profiled in his book *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and he treats their 'tumultuous journey through adversity and achievement' with respect and admiration.[20]

One might expect that Brokaw would portray his own 'silent generation' that came of age in the 1950s as lacking the heroism of those who came before him, and he does not complicate his picture by looking at the difficulties that many World War II and Korean War veterans experienced in reintegrating into civilian society, as portrayed in

*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Blackboard Jungle*. Instead he acknowledges his debt to his elders, writing that 'they came home to resume lives enriched by the values they had defended' and stressing that his own life was blessed because of them: 'I am a child of the American men and women who . . . devoted their adult years to the building of modern America'.[21] Brokaw himself was born in 1940 in small-town South Dakota where he spent twenty-two years before moving in 1962 to work as a television journalist in Omaha after covering the 1956 election on the local radio station in Yankton. In his more recent memoir *A Long Way From Home* (2002), Brokaw notes that 'the prism through which you look back on your own life gives off a certain rosy tint', and he portrays his childhood in the 1950s as innocent and optimistic 'at a time when everything seemed possible in America'.[22]

Brokaw emphasizes in *A Long Way from Home* his fortune of being 'born in the right place at the right time' as the son of industrious hoteliers, and identifies his whiteness as a sign of privilege: 'as a young white male in the fifties, I was a member of the ruling class, however inadequate my qualifications or uncertain my prospects'.[23] His upbringing was very insular and his cultural engagement was limited to following the Brooklyn Dodgers through their run of World Series finals and his adolescent interest in beauty pageants. The young Brokaw listened to Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Pat Boone; some movies were shown locally (*Marty*, *The Seven Year Itch*, *Rebel without a Cause*); and he mentions Grace Metalious's controversial novel *Peyton Place*, but not whether he read it.[24] Perhaps to offset the whiteness of his world, Brokaw focuses one chapter on race, admitting that the civil rights struggle was far removed from his life ('on the issue of race we affected a certain moral superiority – or, in many instances, a benign indifference'), although the nearby Sioux reservation intrigued him (Indian history was not taught at his school) .[25] He even puts spin on his teenage ignorance of race issues, expressing gratitude that his 'formative years in the mostly white environment of the upper Midwest sharpened my sensibilities about the inequities and the complexities of race for the rest of my life', a concern that later informed his 1997 NBC documentary *Why Can't We Live Together?* focusing on the hidden racial rifts in suburbia.[26]

It is tempting to applaud Brokaw's picture of a decade of opportunities as the prize won by the generation that fought in World War II, but the result is that he brushes over many social and cultural complexities of the 1950s. Brokaw admits that 'it wasn't a perfect world, of

course', but he fails to examine the causes and consequences of these imperfections. One has the impression reading Brokaw that had he examined the cultural contradictions of the 1950s without the filter of 'the greatest generation' that came before it, the 'prism' through which he looks would not be as rosy. His nostalgia stems from his sheltered experience of the 1950s, which Michael Kammen argues was a nostalgic decade and not the forward-looking one that the Year 2000 exhibition at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair might suggest (see Chapter 5). In exploring the nostalgia boom of the 1950s Kammen focuses on the triumphant liberation of the allies (many European communities in the US were in jubilant mood), the American Traditions Project 1957–9 (dedicated to dramatizing 'incidents illustrating how the good sense of Americans has prevailed in their daily lives'), and the re-launch of the *American Heritage* magazine in 1954 (promising readers 'a good deal of nostalgia' and an escape from commercialism).[27]

It is the legacy of two conservative periods, the 1980s and the 2000s, that has done most to resuscitate the 1950s as Brokaw's decade of 'broader horizons' and 'expanded rights', rather than the conformist and anodyne period pictured by the New Left in the 1960s, full of 'one-dimensional men' (Herbert Marcuse), frustrated housewives (Betty Friedan) and invisible minorities (Ralph Ellison). Some critics in the early 1960s who did not share the values of the student movement such as Barry Goldwater and Milton Friedman were keen to play up the traditionalism of the 1950s to offset what they saw as the pernicious effects of government intervention in the Roosevelt years.[28] The cold war was actually very good for conservatives, recruiting the likes of the previously liberal Ronald Reagan. 'By 1960 I had completed the process of self-conversion', Reagan claimed, turning away from big government towards the free enterprise that marked his eight years in office during the 1980s.[29]

The fact that the decade now has a rosy glow has been helped by attacks on the permissiveness of the 1960s by US and UK leaders George W. Bush and Tony Blair, both of whom were children of the 1950s at a time when Bush's grandfather Prescott Bush was Republican Senator for Connecticut (1952–63), despite his dubious connections to the eugenics movement during World War II. As Mark Lytle argues, the attempt to impeach Bill Clinton in 1998 over his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky and the Republican attacks in 2004 on Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry over his involvement in the Vietnam War (he was even dubbed 'Commie Kerry') can both be seen as assaults on the liberal version of the 1960s.[30] In fact, the

conservative mood of the early twenty-first century has helped to reframe the 1950s as a time of social stability and good manners: a 'kinder, gentler' decade (as Mary Caputi calls it) where the carefree characters of George Lucas's film *American Graffiti* (1973) and the ABC sitcom *Happy Days* (1974–84) jostle with the heartland mentality evoked by Tom Brokaw and Hillary Clinton in their memoirs. Rather than the caustic tones of critic Eric Goldman in his scathing farewell to 'the stuffy decade' ('we live in a heavy, humourless, sanctimonious, stultifying atmosphere'), 'the fifties' have now been recreated as an optimistic, noble and prosperous decade.[31]

Michael Kammen argues that 'nostalgia is most likely to increase or become prominent in times of transition, in periods of cultural anxiety, or when a society feels a strong sense of discontinuity with its past'.[32] This explains why postwar nostalgia was prominent in the early 1970s (with the Vietnam War dragging on despite Nixon's election promise to withdraw troops), at the turn of the millennium when 'end of history' theories were common, and during the global tumult of the early twenty-first century following 9/11 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Cultural historian Stephanie Coontz asserts that nostalgia for the 1950s is serious business, even though it should not be taken literally. She argues that many Americans are not really nostalgic for the insularity of the Levittown family, but seek a refuge from late-century concerns:

> the belief that the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future. The contrast between the perceived hopefulness of the fifties and our own misgivings about the future is key to contemporary nostalgia for the period.[33]

This view certainly informs Brokaw's perspective on the decade and has filtered down into popular memory, in contrast to more immediate problems of broken families, gun crime and urban governance in the late twentieth century.

The passing of a generation also feeds the kind of nostalgia evident in two recent music biopics: *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005). The films follow the careers of two major musicians of the late 1950s, Ray Charles and Johnny Cash, leading to Academy Awards for Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles and Reese Witherspoon as June Carter (Cash's singer partner, later his wife, and a member of the founding family of country

music). Even though the films offer different racially inflected views of the postwar South, they both begin with traumatic childhood moments – Ray Charles watches his younger brother drown and Johnny Cash's brother is killed in a sawing accident – to explain the psychological complexity of the pair and the honing of their musical talents. In both films the serious study of postwar American culture is overshadowed by vibrant soundtracks and the mythical impact of the singers' lives.

Nostalgia for 'the fifties' certainly has its commercial side as evident in the 2006 Broadway revival of the 1954 musical *The Pajama Game* starring the Sinatraesque crooner Harry Connick Jr and Elvis Presley's home Graceland being made an Historic National Monument in March 2006. One positive outcome of this nostalgia has been the rediscovery of roots music. This has been aided by the Smithsonian Institute's repackaging of the Lomax recordings in the late 1990s, Bruce Springsteen's recording of an album of Pete Seeger songs *We Shall Overcome* (2006), and the efforts of music collector and producer T. Bone Burnett, who has now become the official consultant on a range of American films following the success of the bluegrass and old-time soundtrack for the Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). The rediscovery of the Carter family, the bluegrass pioneer Earl Scruggs and the old-time legend Ralph Stanley (who has been 'on tour' since 1946) in the *O Brother* spin-off documentary *Down from the Mountain* (2000) and the long roots tradition profiled in the PBS documentary *The Appalachians* (2005) reveal the vitality of regional music in the post-World War II years often overlooked from a cold war perspective.[34] This renewed interest in regional cultures has helped to shift the emphasis away from the corporate and suburban Northeast which often dominates discussions of the 1950s to the outlying and patchwork cultures that the likes of Harry Smith, Pete Seeger, Jack Kerouac and Robert Frank were exploring at the time.

But, more often than not, the focus remains fixed on a decade dominated by a cold war agenda. This static image has been aided by the insistence of pundit Ann Coulter in her muckraking book *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (2003) that McCarthy was wrongly vilified by liberals: 'in his brief ride across the landscape, Joe McCarthy . . . sacrificed his life, his reputation, his name. The left cut down a brave man, but not before the American people heard the truth'.[35] The likes of Coulter, Michelle Marvin and Rush Limbaugh on the Right have added their voices to 'the culture wars', in which conservatives and liberals slugged it out in the late

1980s and 1990s in a battle to define American cultural values, such as Allan Bloom's bold claim that McCarthyism 'had no effect whatsoever on [university] curriculum of appointments' in the 1950s.[36] More recently Coulter has tried to rescue the 'indispensable' McCarthy as a responsible conservative during the cold war but her primary goal is to attack what she calls 'liberal mythmaking' and 'liberal treachery'. Although Coulter is an extreme case, the problem with the culture wars is that, rather than creating a debate about the value and significance of the past, the warring factions (particularly on the Right, but also the likes of filmmaker Michael Moore on the Left) often resort to the kind of propaganda that recalls the anticommunist strategies of the 1950s, demonizing the opposition before accusing them of 'sedition and immorality'.[37] Nostalgia, then, is rarely innocent, especially when linked to claims of ownership over national identity.

There has been at least one nostalgia film about the 1950s for each decade since – *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Forrest Gump* (1994) – with critics divided on whether the Oscar-winning *Forrest Gump* provides a liberal appraisal of postwar history, or whether Forrest's homely values rooted in the South of the 1950s veil the kind of historical amnesia practised more explicitly in Ann Coulter's polemic. Another film that has much stronger liberal motivations in exploring the myths of the fifties is *Pleasantville* (1998), but even this does not entirely escape the nostalgic mode it sets out to critique. The film offers a neat allegory for the rise of McCarthyism by contrasting the black-and-white world of homely small-town America with the arrival of colour as a signifier of passion and political conviction.[38] Despite its experiments with colour, the film never quite escapes the simplicity of its central conceit of transporting two teenagers from the media-saturated 1990s into the anodyne TV-land of 1950s sitcoms in the mode of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. It is precisely this 'Ozzie and Harriet' view of the decade that Stephanie Coontz argues lies at the heart of the culture wars between conservatives and liberals.[39]

## Critical Interventions

A great deal of cultural attention in the early twenty-first century has focused on tributes to the personalities of the 1950s, as those of Tom Brokaw's generation face retirement and other prominent figures of the decade such as musicians Ray Charles and Johnny Cash, novelist Saul Bellow, playwright Arthur Miller, director Robert Wise, actors

Marlon Brando and Glenn Ford, artist Allan Kaprow, economist J. K. Galbraith and activists Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King (widow of Martin Luther King Jr) have passed away. But there has also been a return to more searching interventions into the decade. These have ranged from reissues of classic 1950s texts, including *The Lonely Crowd* (reissued in 2001), *The Organization Man* (2002) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (2005); the projected film re-make of the 1958 adaptation of Herman Wouk's bestseller *Marjorie Morningstar* (with Scarlett Johansson in line to play Natalie Wood's role as a Jewish girl caught between tradition and passion); neo-punk singer Pink's dramatic pop song 'Family Portrait' (2003) which uses the shadow of World War III to explore domesticity and the trauma of family separation; and a number of films that have unearthed neglected elements of 1950s culture.[40]

The mid-1980s saw musicians and writers drawing parallels to the 1950s as two key moments in the long cold war, which had become a reality again in 1983 with the launch of Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defensive Initiative. These renewed cold war fears are reflected in the former Police vocalist Sting's song 'Russians' (1986), with its explicit links between Khrushchev's earlier threat of to 'bury' the United States and Reagan's current promise to 'protect' US citizens.[41] But, despite the Star Wars initiative and the Doomsday Clock being reset at three minutes to midnight to reflect the renewed nuclear threats, the cold war was never as intense as it had been in the early 1950s, and the televised dismantling of the Berlin Wall on 7 November 1989 caught the public imagination as the most potent symbol of the end of communism.

Two months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, in September 1989, the singer and one-time Levittown resident, Billy Joel, released his single 'We Didn't Start the Fire', with its breathless cavalcade of postwar culture: 'Rosenbergs, H-Bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjam / Brando, *The King and I*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*'.[42] Joel uses the Dylanesque patter technique of rhythmical listing to give historical momentum to the song. The narrative begins in 1949 and proceeds through the 1950s to Kennedy's assassination of 1963 before leaping ahead to the re-emergence of the cold war in the 1980s, prompting Joel's exasperated cry: 'what else do I have to say?' His invective is launched against national leaders (the names of Truman, Eisenhower and Stalin feature prominently and Nixon appears twice, once in his role in HUAC and then later as President), while the chorus suggests Joel's generation have been caught in the crossfire. Elsewhere on the 1989 *Storm Front* album Joel described himself as a 'cold war kid in

McCarthy time', extending his earlier evocations on *Nylon Curtain* (1982) which praises the blue-collar worker of suburban 'Allentown' and comradeship of Vietnam veterans in 'Goodnight Saigon'. *Nylon Curtain* was an attempt to write a song cycle about political disillusionment in the early 1980s, and turning forty prompted Joel in 1989 to give 'We Didn't Start the Fire' a broad historical sweep, following an alleged encounter with a high school pupil in which Joel's generation were accused of not having experienced history.[43]

Although there have been important historical reappraisals of the cold war from a transnational perspective, such as John Lewis Gaddis's *The Cold War* (2005), many recent cultural reflections on the 1950s have focused on social upheavals taking place on American soil. Most commentators agree that the film industry has recently come together to provide a left-liberal response to the more pernicious forces that George Bush's war on terrorism has spread at home (such as the Patriot Act with its resonances of covert cold war investigations) and is reinforced by a number of films that make parallels between the two periods, a trend underlined by actor/director George Clooney's speech at the 2006 Academy Awards, in which he revelled at being part of an industry self-consciously 'out of touch' with dominant social forces.

While Ann Coulter tries to rescue McCarthy and the Republican version of the fifties through polemic and browbeating, a number of recent films have re-investigated the relationship between past and present by entering into a debate about what cultural memory means. Whereas the historical critique in *Pleasantville* never quite reaches beyond its nostalgic framework, films such as *Far From Heaven* (2002), *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), *Where the Truth Lies* (2005) and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) are much more conscious of the decade's key pressure points. All four films can be read as an excavation of a decade that many in the film industry believe has been bleached of its complexity by conservatives claiming it as their own.

Two precedents for this critical approach are Peter Bogdanovich's film *The Last Picture Show* (1971) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) which, released at moments of great nostalgia for the 1950s, explore the emotional and physical cruelty that bubbles under seemingly wholesome relationships, while more recently dramatist Tony Kushner explores the Rosenberg case and political repression in his epic gay fantasia *Angels in America* (1992) and Robert Redford's *Quiz Show* (1997) revisits the big-money scandal that rocked the television networks back in 1958. Even more recently *Mona Lisa Smile* and *Far*

*From Heaven* examine the impact of enforced gender norms of the 1950s. As discussed in Chapter 5, *Mona Lisa Smile* contrasts a generation of college girls bred for conformity at Wellesley College with the free-thinking art teacher Katherine Ann Watson (Julia Roberts), who challenges their paint-by-numbers world with the complexities of Jackson Pollock's abstracts and prompts them to question the domestic seductions of the decade.

*Far From Heaven* also focuses on this ideal suburban world in leafy Connecticut where a picture-perfect house and the latest commodities appear to fulfil executive Frank Whittaker and housewife Cathy Whitaker (Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore) – that is, until Cathy discovers her husband is gay. Todd Haynes's film deliberately deploys the iconography and domestic mise-en-scène of Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas, using widescreen, a heightened colour palette and deep focus to stunning effect, to explore what lies beneath the nostalgia for the decade. As a retelling of Sirk's melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), which investigates the implausibility of a New England romance across class lines, *Far From Heaven* adds the extra ingredient of race. Although racial restrictions of the mid-1950s (even in the Northeast) mean that Cathy and her black gardener Raymond Deagan's budding relationship is doomed, Raymond (Dennis Haysbert) acts as a catalyst to help Cathy to see beyond the limitations of her suburban dream-world. As Mary Caputi notes, the Sirkian references of *Far From Heaven* prove to be useful tools for enabling Haynes to get beyond the mythical construction of the decade and interrogate its 'inconsistences, hypocrises, and internal confusions'.[44]

Compared to the lush cinematography of *Far From Heaven* the first few minutes of the docudrama *Good Night, and Good Luck* might lead the viewer to think that this is a nostalgic 'monochrome memory' of the 1950s. Evocative black-and-white cinematography offsets the soft jazz that plays at a CBS dinner party and the smoke spiralling from Edward Murrow's ubiquitous cigarette. The film explores the politics of broadcast journalism in the early days of television from a post-9/11 perspective, a period which left-liberal thinkers and journalists have dubbed 'The New McCarthyism'.[45] The central focus of *Good Night, and Good Luck* is Murrow's attempt to expose Joe McCarthy in the run up to the Army–McCarthy hearings of 1954. The fifty-year parallels are very subtle in the film, but network censorship following the Janet Jackson incident of February 2004 (see the Introduction) and the rhetoric of a divided nation following the November 2004 election

**Figure C.2** Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore in the domestic suburban idyll of *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002). © Killer Films/The Kobal Collection.

(with Democratic states threatening to secede after George W. Bush won a second term) suggest that the Murrow and McCarthy stand-off was a defining moment in the culture wars.

As director George Clooney and producer/writer Grant Heslov make clear, *Good Night, and Good Luck* is politically motivated, with Clooney seeing the *See It Now* broadcast on McCarthy as one of two defining moments in television history (the other being CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite's 'mired in stalemate' report on the Vietnam War in February 1968) .[46] But Clooney and Heslov try hard not to indulge in a heroes-and-villains-style history lesson, in which Murrow (played by David Strathairn) would take the role of noble vigilante and McCarthy demonized as the 'buffoon assassin', as the *New York Post* had called him in the 1950s. Instead, the film makes clear that Murrow is in danger of losing his objectivity at times, while McCarthy is left to do his own damage by appearing as himself in extensive archival news footage. The film industry rarely portrays history without heroes, but director George Clooney's ensemble cast comes close, even though Clooney makes his intent obvious by appearing as Fred Friendly, Murrow's producer at CBS.[47]

Another contemporary film which explores the contours of post-World War II America is the Canadian director Atom Egoyan's

**Figure C.3** David Strathairn as Edward Murrow in the CBS studio in *Good Night, and Good Luck* (George Clooney, 2005). © Warner Independent/2929 Prod/The Kobal Collection.

neo-noir *Where the Truth Lies*, adapted from the 2003 novel by Rupert Holmes. Rather than taking a retrospective look at the 1950s from the perspective of the present, the film is reminiscent of a Hitchcock thriller in its complex double-plotting and psycho-sexual intrigue. Egoyan's film follows Holmes's novel in setting the present in 1974 when a savvy young author Karen O'Connor (Alison Lohman) is commissioned to write an account of the comedy team Vince Collins and Lanny Morris (played by Colin Firth and Kevin Bacon), based loosely on the comic duo Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. As a young girl growing up in the late 1950s O'Connor idolized the pair and actually appeared on one of their twenty-four-hour telethons to raise money for polio relief.

The film shuttles over fifteen years between the present (1974) and past (1959), with O'Connor playing detective in an attempt to discover the motivation behind the death of a student chambermaid Maureen O'Flaherty (Rachel Blanchard), an incident which marks the end of Morris and Collins's professional and personal relationship. While O'Connor is intent on gleaning Collins's side of the story, she receives regular written instalments from Morris that mythologize the late 1950s as a time of Rat Packers, debauchery and drug-taking: a

hedonistic portrait of Morris which contrasts with the gentle man whom she meets by accident on a transcontinental flight in 1974 and whom she remembers from her childhood.

Where the film succeeds best is in drawing the viewer's attention to the constructed nature of memory, in which Morris's exaggerated stories of life on the road with his partner in 1959 are an elaborate cover-up for the events leading to the death of Maureen O'Flaherty. Sharing a similar theme to *Far From Heaven*, the repressed truth revolves around Collins's homosexual feelings for Morris, which the novel and film deliberately hide from the viewer until towards the end. The fact that O'Connor (a shadow-image of O'Flaherty) is caught up in a web of romance and intrigue with the two men implies that there can be no disinterested historical view; at one point in the novel O'Connor even admits: 'I had not had an extended conversation with anyone in the last twenty-four hours to whom I hadn't been lying . . . I wondered what it would be feel like to speak the truth'.[48] By pulling her into the midst of the dissembling world O'Connor has been commissioned to investigate, *Where the Truth Lies* implies that the 1950s is more deceptive and ambiguous a period than it first appears precisely because it seems so unproblematic on the surface.

## The Cultural Legacy of the 1950s

One theme I have pursued through this book is the way in which cultural modernism was undergoing a transition in the 1950s. Partly shaped by the cold war climate and partly influenced by the growth of mass culture after the war, the book has argued that modernist currents run throughout the major cultural forms of the decade. One reason why on closer inspection the 1950s is such a difficult decade to comprehend is because of the instability of postwar modernism, representing an artistic retreat for some practitioners and a critical social tool for others. Much fifties nostalgia, such as travel writer Bill Bryson's light-hearted account of his midwestern childhood in *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (2006), feeds off the popular trends of the decade without looking closely at industrial forces (the paperback book market, broadcasting networks, advertising, private and public art patrons) and the more organic changes that gave rise to the blurring of genres in tragicomic fiction, mixed-mode performance and hybrid forms of music and art.

The contradictions of the 1950s become more evident when focusing on the interrelation of cultural forms, played out in the arena

where forces of standardization (the *Billboard* Top 40, dead-centrist television programming, Levittown housing and corporate architecture) came into contact with cultures of hybridity (roots music, rock 'n' roll, avant-garde film and half-abstract art) as two antagonistic social trends.[49] Modernism is a limiting tool if used merely as a periodizing concept (ending in the United States some time between the 1930s and the 1960s), or closely linked to social progress and industrialization, or merely a label for erudite and difficult art. The institutionalization of modernist art in the late twentieth century, particularly the corporate sponsorship of avant-garde art, suggests that modernism is a dated concept ready to be consigned to history. But modernism still has its uses if it is taken as a modality that inflects cultural transitions in American life during the twentieth century. In fact, after the waning of critical interest in postmodernism in the mid-1990s, critics have extended the historical horizon of 'late modernism' to describe a long historical arc that includes cultural production after World War II.

If one view of postmodernism is a rapid recycling of past styles, then it is premised on a theory of late capitalism that replaces continuity with the relentless pace of the market. Fredric Jameson discusses the way in which modernism is bound up with both continuity and rupture; it rarely seeks a complete break with history, but rather tries to negotiate between present and past. Jameson claims that late modernism emerged as 'the survival and transformation of more properly modernist creative impulses after World War II' as evident in Jasper Johns paintings, Vladimir Nabokov's fiction and John Cage's musical performances; as such, Jameson argues late modernism is a distinctly North American form.[50] Rather than separating 'art' (good) from 'culture' (bad) as the Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer attempted, Jameson looks back to art critic Clement Greenberg's realization that art and culture were increasingly entangled after the war (see Chapter 5) and the kind of mixed mode or maverick modernism that revived the avant-garde attempt to close the gap between art and life. There is a historical dimension here in that modernism implies a continual reassessment of the past in light of the ever-changing present. Looking simultaneously in two directions is precisely what Eisenhower and Kennedy did in their 1961 speeches and what, forty years later, is again evident in the cycle of fifties retro-films.

While the partisanship of the culture wars has distorted certain elements of 1950s culture, some recent critical interventions help to refocus attention on the material and historical fabric of mid-

twentieth-century America. Rather than resorting to the heavy-handed *Pleasantville* trick of transplanting a 1990s character into a 1950s setting, these films offer more interesting narrative links from one moment to the other. For example, the retro-qualities of *Far From Heaven* may tempt the critic to discuss the film in terms of post-modern pastiche, but it can be better be positioned alongside *Where the Truth Lies* as investigative texts that work inside the frame of nostalgia to unearth hidden elements that would otherwise lie beyond cultural memory. This is not about appropriating the past to justify or condemn the present, but using culture as a critical tool that frees the viewer from believing that there can be only one authentic historical account.

Following in the wake of two experimental reworkings of the early 1950s, E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) which tread the fine line between fact and fiction to examine the climate of distrust during the McCarthy and Rosenberg years, in *1959: A Novel* (1992) African American writer Thulani Davis turned her attention to a transitional year at the end of the decade. Telling the story of a rural community in Turner, Virginia, the novel begins with the death of Billie Holiday on 17 July 1959, itself a symbol of the close of the decade. The story follows twelve-year-old Willie Tarrant as she comes of age and slowly becomes aware of racial oppression in her hometown. But when eight black teenagers demand to be served in a local store five years after the formal end of segregation, Willie comes to realize that grassroots forces can be mobilized against those who wield power. The story charts Willie's rites of passage by offering a double movement into the future and past. She is inspired when she meets Martin Luther King and absorbs the political writings of James Baldwin, but Willie also discovers her family heritage when she reads her Aunt Fannie's diary that records the tribulations facing African Americans at the beginning of the century. This symbolic reaching in two directions is resonant of a mid-century tale, recalling Hannah Arendt's view of the postwar period as one caught between past and future.

Davis has been criticized for being too self-conscious in her novel of cultural and political awakening and for allowing the seams of the story to show through, but this appears to be precisely Davis's modernist intent.[51] *1959* is not straightforward historical storytelling, but an attempt to intervene in and to reconstruct the transition between the 1950s and 1960s in an honest way. The alternative strategy of hiding the seams of the story may imply an act of deception,

transporting readers into the past without prompting them to ask questions about the purpose of historical construction. Davis's story of the late 1950s and early 1960s is one in which conflicting cultural pressures cannot be easily resolved, but it also reveals the possibility that personal reflection and collective action can come together in meaningful ways.

Although Willie spends much of her childhood and early adolescence watching television and listening to the radio, the act of engaging directly with culture (rather than casually consuming it) enables her to understand that history affects whole communities and not just individuals. Culture in this sense offers Willie an expanded field of experience, helping her to cultivate an awareness of the multiple intersections between art and politics and the complex relationships between national and local history. Like her earlier (but more naïve) white incarnation Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers' novella *The Member of the Wedding* growing up in the Deep South during World War II (see Chapter 1), Willie learns she must wear 'a mixture of old and new clothes' if she is to make a mark on the future.[52] Although history has been 'ripped up and set loose' in her Virginian town at the end of the 1950s, Willie learns the supreme lesson that if she listens very closely to the past then hidden stories will 'cling very close to [her] ear and tell softly what [she has] forgotten or never known'.[53]