



NATO THOMPSON

# CULTURE AS WEAPON

THE ART OF INFLUENCE  
IN EVERYDAY LIFE

"A powerful, bracing, important read."  
—JEFF CHANG, author of *Can't Stop Won't Stop*

## CULTURE AS WEAPON

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## INTRODUCTION

As every artist knows, Plato argued that artists should be banned from society. A believer that we live in a pale shadow of a world of perfect forms, he felt that the arts were dangerous imitations, three degrees removed from the world of ideal forms. He feared that the arts could stir the passions of the populace, muddying the objective rationality required in the republic.

Plato's opinion certainly runs counter to the operating logic of society today. The United States is a consumer society awash in the products of culture. I consider movies, online programming, video games, advertisements, sports, retail outlets, music, art museums, and social networking all a part of the arts, as they all influence our emotions, actions, and our very understanding of ourselves as citizens. And as much as politicians would never call themselves artists, they all understand the value of showmanship and public rela-

tions when it comes to the machinations of governance. But as much as I would like to simply discard Plato's warning, it certainly haunted the writing of this book. For that artistic technique of stirring the passions and appealing to the intimate side in each of us has become inseparable from power.

In *Culture as Weapon*, I do not seek to uncover a cultural conspiracy that puppet masters deploy culture to brainwash us. Instead, I want to explain the ways in which those in power have to use culture to maintain and expand their influence, and the role that we all play in that process. Throughout the twentieth century and into the contemporary era, the world has witnessed the realization of age-old avant-garde demand that art become part of the everyday. Art and life have in fact merged.

At first blush, this train of thought strikes us as fairly obvious. We understand that media is a crucial part of how the world works. We understand that advertising has crept into many facets of consumer life. And we even understand that spin has come to be a critical part of the political landscape. Ultimately, we understand that message-craft and manipulating the world to cater to how we feel has ingrained itself into every mechanism of power. So, if none of this is new, why write a book?

Simply stated, the industries dependent on shaping how we think have reached an unprecedented scale. As a global strategy deployed at every level, culture has become a profound, and ubiquitous, weapon. Communications and public-relations departments have become essential parts

of every business. Global spending on advertising reached nearly \$600 billion in 2015.<sup>1</sup> One in seven people on the planet are on Facebook. By 2011, 91 percent of children ages two to seventeen played video games.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, teenagers spend nearly nine hours a day looking at screens.<sup>3</sup> And those are just the measurable aspects of culture's exponential growth. There are countless philosophical questions to be asked: How has the role of music in everyday life changed in the last one hundred years? How many scripted television shows can one watch? How many more creative ways are there to shape the city?

And yet, we remain unappreciative of just how dramatic this shift in the techniques of power has become. In particular, we continue to read the world as though it still has one foot solidly planted in the realm of reason. It is in our global DNA to identify as rational subjects. But perhaps, this Enlightenment-era thinking could use a heavy pause as we discover just how emotional, affective, we truly are.

Certainly this turn away from an Enlightenment belief in our own rationality stands on the shoulders of great thinkers from Adorno to Gramsci, from cultural studies of the Birmingham school with figures such as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and Raymond Williams, to more contemporary, less structuralist, approaches by Judith Butler. But while I invoke some of these theories in the book, my main goal is to make sense of just how affective, how culturally savvy are the institutions—Apple stores, Facebook, real-estate moguls, to name just a few—that we confront daily.

I hope to demonstrate a broad-strokes reading of the

uses of culture. We will define culture simply. And in doing so, we begin to see it everywhere, from counterinsurgency tactics in the Iraq War to the origins of IKEA to rock bands singing for aid for Africa to the design of the Mac to the war on drugs. It is a motley assemblage of seemingly disparate phenomena—and intentionally so. For power is visible in the hands of our elected officials as often as it is hidden in a package of inanity. The many forms of power in our world have sophisticated approaches to reaching that very needy, fearful, and social creature we call ourselves.

One of my key hopes for this book is to echo something that Walter Lippmann had voiced long ago: that democracy is a fallible project rhetorically dependent on a rational subject, who, quite frankly, does not exist. In fact, the illusion of the rational subject has been extremely helpful in hiding the totality of these techniques. Understanding the power of association and the uses of emotion can explain a U.S. election better than a lens of capitalism. Just as Marxist philosophers in Britain sought to understand why the British populace turned away from Labour through the rise of Margaret Thatcher, just as Thomas Frank struggled to understand why working-class Kansas voted Republican, and just as, further back, Karl Marx asked why the French people rallied around the tyrant Louis Bonaparte in 1852, I want to make a further contribution to the cultural study of why people don't act rationally.

While it is certainly demonstrable that one can encourage a consumer to purchase Coca-Cola through a clever, large-scale advertising campaign, it remains unclear how

the aggregate of advertising approaches collectively affect the opinions and actions of that consumer. It also remains unclear the secondary results of cultural manipulation when deployed by politicians, whether in the case of war abroad or at home. These cumulative effects of the deployment of affect has made for a very messy social terrain. It is sort of like a greenhouse effect of cultural production that changes our sense of the world around us.

Some compelling implications arise when we read power through its use of culture. For example, power has contributed to the strategies and vulnerabilities of social movements by manipulating media and public perception. Media activism and social movements that cull from the techniques of advertising to make a larger point have a long history, but it is useful to appreciate the double-edged nature of deploying culture. Simple facts—that fear motivates faster than hope, that appeals to emotion do not rely on the truth, or that rationality need not drive enthusiasm—make the terrain of activism that uses culture more precarious.

From an arts perspective, I would like to place what is considered the traditional arts (theater, visual arts, dance, and film) into conversation with not only the commercial arts, but also public relations and advertising. In this way, we can position this more broad definition of art as something that has a potentiality for being both deeply coercive and absolutely powerful. After a century of cultural manipulation, it would be naive to discuss art without simultaneously discussing the manner in which art is already deployed by power daily. With real-estate developers and the tech boom

both boldly embracing the power of art to change society, with the deployment of the use of the term *creative* to rebrand innovative capitalist design as an art, one has to appreciate, and perhaps second-guess, just how far art has come. By demystifying the inherent good of art, one can place art in the same conversation as other phenomena of daily life.

As much as this book is about public opinion, I know that public opinion is not everything. In fact, I would say a large part of power doesn't depend on public opinion. The Fortune 500 companies list Walmart at number one with its basic approach of low-cost consumer goods being its strategy. The second company is ExxonMobil, who continues to churn out oil for an energy dependent globe. For both of these companies, power resides in getting the basic goods to people while controlling that market. Yes, they advertise and to some degree shape their brand, but that isn't the formula for their massive sales. So while the uses of culture have grown immensely, they don't exist in a vacuum.

That said, how we understand the world certainly remains a key part of our collective journey. It's an obvious thing to say. But perhaps we have to appreciate that we, as evolutionary creatures, are ultimately fearful social beings who try our best to grapple with phenomena beyond our ken. We try to understand everything from climate change to global war to capitalism to biotechnology. But we can only process that information through the lens of our intimate selves. We interpret the world by way of our personal needs and desires, and so we are vulnerable to larger powers who know how to speak to those needs.

# CULTURE AS WEAPON



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## THE REAL CULTURE WAR

There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.

—PATRICK BUCHANAN

Donald Trump's extraordinary ascent in 2015 and 2016 may have undermined much of what we understand about American politics, but it has also reaffirmed a truth almost forgotten: as Pat Buchanan goes, so goes the Republican Party.

When Buchanan spoke at the 1992 Republican convention, his hyperbolic appeals to the human soul echoed a growing furor in his party. After eight years of Reagan and four years of Bush, it was no longer enough to define American values. It was time to look inward—to fight the war within. Buchanan did not get the Republican nomination, but his diagnosis (“a religious war . . . for the soul of America”) would have a tremendous impact in the years to come.

But what, exactly, was that impact? For those American liberals who still remember the culture war—and their number is decreasing—the story is a straightforward one: the fear of change—of cultural irrelevance—was used by Republicans to sustain an increasingly white, increasingly aging coalition. Postmodernity had sunk its teeth into the heart of the United States, and the salt of the earth were scrambling to get their bearings: the parts of the United States that had frowned upon the upheaval of the 1960s could be mobilized into action. Artists would be collateral damage.

In the popular liberal lore, then, the culture war has become synonymous with a cheap form of politics perpetuated by the American right. But the culture wars were more than a battle between darkness and light, between conservatism and liberalism, between the past and the future. Something else was at work.

Everyone who works in the arts has been indoctrinated into the origin story of the culture war. From within, it was a story of contraction and fear. In the span of only a few years in the late 1980s and early '90s, direct grants to artists were eliminated, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was forced to confront a pattern of budget cuts that diminished an already impoverished federal department. The arts became a focal point for a party determined to galvanize the masses of white anger against liberalism, democracy, and freedom of expression. The land of Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley, of AIDS activism and socialist leanings, of queer-friendly attitudes

and bohemian lifestyles—this land was condemned and stigmatized.

Looking back, though, it's hard not to see a double game at work. If the narrative of evil Republicans and victimized Democrats seems somehow too familiar, too cozy, that's because it is. To see the culture wars as a story of culture—of Culture—as a victim is to miss the methods with which the war was fought. The culture war wasn't a war on culture—at least, not exclusively. It was also a war that used culture.

This strategic deployment of culture was both an improvement and an innovation; many of these methods had been developed decades earlier in the field of public relations. Three decades later, we can see examples across the political and social spectrum. Today, culture is a weapon deployed by Democrats and Republicans, by the news media and by powerful corporations, by architects and social-media developers. To an extent that would have been difficult to fathom in the early 1990s, competing uses of culture are no longer a sideshow; they have moved toward the very center of American life.

This is not to suggest, of course, that there exists some glorious, logical past in which our politics were free of irrationality, emotion, or fear. As long as there have been politicians, business leaders, ad executives, activists, artists, hucksters, and public-relations experts, there has been a shared awareness that battles in public life are not fought and won purely on the basis of logic and information. What has changed is scale. Advertising now pervades every aspect of daily life, and public-relations departments—once



a novelty—have become critical components of every business and nonprofit.

This is, above all, a book about that investigates the consequences of this shift in scale. It is about the transformative change in the uses of culture by the disparate network of people and institutions we'll call—perhaps a bit hyperbolically—"the powerful."

But it is also a book about artists. Emotion, affect, manipulation—the very tools key to the cultural shift I intend to describe are, after all, tools artists have deployed for centuries. These tools have been captured and coopted, and this, in turn, has had an impact on how artists work. (This is not to say that all artists—or most artists—have stood in opposition to power. Indeed, throughout history, many of them produced little more than a kind of advertising campaign for the powerful—think of court painters or sculptors who ultimately produced fetish objects for the wealthy.)

Which artists are most salient to this discussion of the deployment of culture by the powerful? Whose work and life overlap with the concerns I'm laying out in this book? I'd like to briefly suggest three imperfect categories of artists.

First, there are the oracles: artists that conjure visions of the future through their art. These are artists such as Andy Warhol, who could see, with peculiar clarity, the imminent fusion of consumerism and visual culture.

Second, there are the resisters: artists who use their art to resist the forces of the powerful. This group could

include everyone from antiwar poster artists, to artist-activists like Abbie Hoffman (who dumped dollar bills onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange to demonstrate the inherent greed of American financial capitalism), to artists who practice a more conceptual approach, such as Adrian Piper, whose interventions in New York urban life in the 1970s brought into relief questions of race and gender.

Third, there are the world makers. These are artists who create, through their art, alternative ways of living. Think of Robert Mapplethorpe, the photographer who, in giving an active visual representation of homosexual culture, brought a world into the public light.

This, then, is a story approached from two angles. Throughout this book, I will hone in on groups and individuals who understand that culture is a tool. The goal is not to counterpoise the noble artist against the cynical advertising executive: I am more interested in the evolution and growing complexity of cultural manipulation over the last few decades than I am in condemning that manipulation. Still, I do not want to draw a false equivalence. Art, even at its most public and most ambitious, doesn't have nearly the kind of effect that the culture industries can have. It's also true that the story art can tell is more contingent, more radical, and ultimately far less beholden to power.

We will move back and forth, in historic leaps and bounds, between artists and the groups that deploy culture to their own ends. This approach requires explicating cer-

tain industries and histories in detail, even if some of the protagonists—Starbucks, IKEA, the advertising executives paid to market luxury condominiums—seem prosaic and banal. But in that banality lies the truth of culture as it exists today: culture is a dangerous device, culture is a twenty-first-century weapon.

We will first turn to the culture war, a historic moment when the two parts of our story—culture as weapon, launched by the powerful, and culture as a tool, deployed by artists—found themselves facing off in the battlefield of politics.

## MORNING IN AMERICA

In 1980, Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign against Jimmy Carter hadn't required much cultural weaponry: skyrocketing oil prices, the hostage crisis in Tehran, and the early spasms of deindustrialization were potent symbols; they didn't need significant elaboration.

But for reelection in 1984, Reagan made a stronger pitch. Some of the largest advertising agencies in the country helped the campaign develop a tone that would stand not only for the candidate, but also for his era. By the time the advertising executive Hal Riney created "Morning in America," the most influential ad of the 1984 campaign, he had been in the advertising industry for decades, including a stint in the military's public-relations office. "Morning in

America" brought to life the nostalgic vision for the future that would help secure Reagan's second term.

The ad begins with images of Americans quietly at work. A fishing boat heads out to sea in the dawn, a businessman exits his taxi, a farmer works his fields, a paperboy delivers the papers, another businessman waves goodbye to his family before getting in his station wagon. Homes are fixed, families are wed. Riney himself delivers the voiceover:

It's morning again in America. Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

The advertisement's strength lies in its subtle shifts from the general to the specific, its leaps between the vague past and the concrete present. In any given sentence, we move from jobs to homes to marriage to inflation to nostalgia, the ad's animating spirit.

Another of the campaign's ads—also produced by

Riney—perhaps best captures the flip side of Reagan’s “aw shucks” American optimism. Titled “Bear,” the advertisement is an extraordinary document of American Cold War paranoia. As a brown bear wanders through the woods, we hear the following script:

There is a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don’t see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it’s vicious—and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who’s right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear.

More Zen koan than narrative, this peculiar parable—also read in Hal Riney’s sonorous, avuncular voice—hints at the rising power of the Soviet Union and Reagan’s capacity to wield a big stick. But it’s only that—a hint. Or perhaps a riddle, or a campfire tale: every viewer gets to imagine her own bear, and the campaign trail thus becomes a locus for all manner of private fears.

Riney’s two contributions to the Reagan campaign are as apt a metaphor as one can find for America’s turn toward nostalgia during the 1980s—a turn that seems particularly striking when one recalls the many visible artistic, cultural, and political movements and subcultures promoting the opposite message during the era. (A partial list might include everything from Run-D.M.C. to the antinuke movement to the aforementioned Mapplethorpe, about whom more in a moment.) But this shift was more than organic; it was, in effect, a weaponized transformation: in only a few

short years, what began with advertising would gravitate toward the center of politics.

What Buchanan described as a culture war in his convention speech was both about conservative politicians’ specific confrontations with left-wing artists, and simultaneously about a larger clash of values. This war was between a mostly white, mostly Christian community of nostalgists and a sexually open-minded, politically progressive constituency open to cultural change and artistic transformation. The “silent majority” Richard Nixon had first identified in 1969 now had a mouthpiece, while the artists, activists, and radicals who had begun their very public work in the late 1960s were ready to go further, to make their presence known.

#### “HE IS NOT AN ARTIST, HE IS A JERK.”

If Hal Riney was an expert propagandist in what we might call the broader culture war, North Carolina senator Jesse Helms was the brilliant general tasked with ground combat in the more targeted culture war—the assault on the artists.

On May 18, 1989, Helms offered his verdict on the artist Andres Serrano, whose infamous photograph, *Piss Christ*, depicted a crucifix submerged in his own urine. “I do not know Mr. Andres Serrano,” Helms said from the Senate floor, “and I hope I never meet him. Because he is not an

artist, he is a jerk . . . Let him be a jerk on his own time and with his own resources. Do not dishonor our Lord.”

Two months later, Helms introduced amendment 420, a controversial bill whose purpose was “To prohibit the use of appropriated funds for the dissemination, promotion, or production of obscene or indecent materials or materials denigrating a particular religion.” The target was obvious: the National Endowment of the Arts, which had supported Mapplethorpe’s openly homosexual photography (“obscene”) and Serrano’s provocations (“denigrating a particular religion”).

Attacking the NEA, which served the interests of the Republicans’ political rivals, was a foolproof political strategy. Ronald Reagan had first attempted to eliminate the NEA in 1980, and by the end of the decade, the wildness and radicalism of artists like Serrano and Mapplethorpe presented an irresistible opportunity for confrontation. In June 1989, Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA) released a statement condemning Serrano and his *Piss Christ* as blasphemous, and politicians like Helms, Buchanan, New York senator Alfonse D’Amato, and Texas congressman Dick Armey picked up the ball, if they hadn’t already.

Yet for most people who followed contemporary art at the time, the idea that an artist might tussle with religion or revel in queer culture didn’t seem especially shocking. Indeed, by the time his name received congressional attention, Serrano had been doing this kind of work for nearly a decade. It was edgy, but it was unlikely to freak out gal-

lery goes; if anything, his photographs had a professional, commercial sheen, which would have been impossible to convey to Helms and his supporters.

Serrano grew up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, the only child of a Honduran father and an Afro-Caribbean mother. He dropped out of high school, but attended art school, where he began to incorporate bodily fluids, dead animals, and religious iconography into his work. As his surrealist photographs began to garner significant attention, Serrano also spent time with a growing counterculture New York art scene. By the time *Piss Christ* gained Jesse Helms’s attention, Serrano was something of an insider, and the photograph had been on view—on and off—since 1986, in New York, and in an exhibition organized by the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (whose NEA grant was the source of all the controversy that followed).<sup>4</sup>

That Serrano was from New York and emerged from its bohemian subcultures was far from incidental. In fact, New York was key to the success and controversies of many of the artists implicated in the culture war. Mapplethorpe was perhaps the paradigmatic example of an artist who remained committed to the battles and freedoms won and fought for in the 1960s and 1970s: like Serrano, he made visible that which many hoped would simply disappear, and New York was where this visibility could assert itself. A photographer since the 1960s, Mapplethorpe was an unapologetic, enthusiastic participant in the homoerotic subculture of the New York City he was born in. For the photographer, the camera was merely part of an overall

sexual experience. "For me," Mapplethorpe said, "S&M means sex and magic, not sadomasochism."<sup>5</sup>

The focus of the attack on Mapplethorpe was the traveling retrospective *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, organized by the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) and curator Janet Kardon. Two weeks before its opening at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., Donald Wildmon's American Family Association brought its campaign against "indecent" art to the attention of the Corcoran board. The Corcoran canceled the show.

The fight over the Mapplethorpe retrospective was even more dramatic than the one over *Piss Christ*. It took a lot of work to be more offensive than Jesus dumped in piss, but if someone could do it, it was the naughty, leather-bound visionary. Mapplethorpe's iconic black-and-white photographs explored not only homosexuality, but homosexual sexuality, which made for a particularly vivid controversy: by attacking the NEA, politicians could gay bash on cable television. In one self-portrait, Mapplethorpe turns back to the camera in chaps and holds a whip that extrudes from his ass: a perfect image to sear into the collective unconscious of a constituency terrified by gay people and gay rights.

Naturally, there were other controversies. Also in 1989, Dread Scott Tyler, a twenty-four-year-old artist and art student, came under fire for *What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* on view at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The piece featured a photomontage of flag burn-

ings and flags draped over coffins. Below the image lay a blank book for visitors to contribute their own thoughts on the subject, and below that was an actual American flag, which one would need to stand on in order to write in the book. To participate in the artwork, visitors had to desecrate the flag.

The response was predictable. Veterans were outraged, and President George Bush, Sr., called the artwork "disgraceful." One offended art teacher even painted a police outline of Tyler, upon which people could walk in order to look at an American flag respectfully hung on the wall. A 1989 article from *The New York Times* captures the spirit of the response:

Call it performance art, Chicago-style. About 3,000 protesters, many of them veterans, flocked to the steps of the Art Institute of Chicago on Sunday to protest an exhibit that, they charge, desecrates the American flag. Some did it by desecrating the Soviet flag. Others carried patriotic signs and flags as they sang and chanted. Some railed against the "satanic communists" they held responsible for the "travesty" inside.

The show had to be temporarily cancelled—not once, but twice—and the Chicago City Council unanimously passed an ordinance enforcing six months in jail and a \$250 fine for anyone found mutilating or defacing the flag. And in a triumph of bipartisanship, Republican senator Bob Dole and Democratic senator Alan Dixon cosponsored a

flag desecration bill that passed unanimously. Meanwhile, the participatory comments book in Dread Scott's artwork became a sort of Rorschach test for the American mood at that time. A sampling of the messages:<sup>6</sup>

Go fuck yourself Dread Scott Tyler. You are lucky to be living in this country. See you in hell. —Chicago Police Officer

I think it's ridiculous that our entire country is symbolized in a flag, an idiotic piece of cloth. It's time people start questioning a country that says it supports freedoms of all sorts when one can't even step on a piece of cloth.

Dear Dread, It is a disgrace to display America like this. Who do you think you are? A small time minority looking for attention—you asshole! If you don't love this country leave it. FUCK YOU.

Given our familiarity with clickbait and slanderous internet comments and the perpetual whirring of the outrage machine, we can appreciate the drama over Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and Tyler as more of the same, only in embryonic form. This appreciation would be entirely accurate as long as we understand just how pervasive these techniques have since become. The cultural battles taking place in the late 1980s seem, in retrospect, like the ascent of something new then and ubiquitous now. Here were news stories driven and dominated by shock and indignation—stories

that could essentially be reenacted and regurgitated by the media with little concern for judgment or conclusions. The various battles of the culture war were surely not the first instance of collective moral panic reinforced by the news media, but it's hard not to see the interchangeability of news and outrage as a prefiguration of our cultural condition. In other words, it's not just angry comments, it's a perfect fusion of culture and politics.

A year after Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and Tyler, Americans learned the name John Frohnmayer. Frohnmayer wasn't another controversial artist; he was, rather, the unassuming fifth chairman of the NEA, appointed by George H. W. Bush in 1989. Unassuming, that is, until 1990. On June 29, Frohnmayer vetoed program grants to artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, who subsequently became known as the NEA Four.

Unsurprisingly, in their rejected performances, the four artists explored sexuality and the concerns of oppressed communities (especially queer, lesbian, and female communities). Hughes's were called *The Well of Horniness* and *The Lady Dick*, which should speak to the objections. Finley, in a piece called *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, covered her naked body in chocolate, "a symbol of women being treated like dirt."<sup>7</sup> Fleck's *Blessed Are the Little Fishes* actively explored the artist's homosexuality and Catholic upbringing—and featured a toilet, which couldn't have pleased the authorities. Miller, meanwhile, made even the language of his grant provocative, writing that he "told Jesse Helms to keep his Porky Pig face out of the NEA and out of my asshole."<sup>8</sup>

Speaking to the NEA panel, Frohnmayer put it aptly: "We are in a no-win situation folks."<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, the veto produced a vast backlash and catapulted the artists into the limelight. In a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post*, Finley wrote, "I know that a witch-hunt of the arts does not truly represent the wishes of the American people but merely those of a fanatic faction. Americans want controversial artists to be funded, and the evidence is there in a new nationwide poll. I hope American citizens of different backgrounds will be able to continue to express themselves freely without fear of censorship."<sup>10</sup>

It didn't quite work out that way.

Which isn't to say that artists had no defenders in Congress. Certainly, there were outliers: during an appropriations meeting in 1990, New York representative Edolphus Towns said, "In essence, art allows us to overcome, transcend, and be made sublime. Those who oppose art oppose openness, and new ideas. To oppose art is to oppose the potential inherent in each of us. To oppose art is to oppose yourself."<sup>11</sup> But for most congressmen and congresswomen—especially those not from Brooklyn—the NEA hubbub was an opportunity to condemn luridness and bask in it in equal measure.

The Republican Party had learned that one could gain the public's attention by sensationalizing a behavior or an artistic practice and criticize it at the same time. Pornography, homosexual sex, feminist liberation, anti-

Americanism—all of this was wrong and produced anxiety in a fearful public, and yet it was hard to resist this alluring material: one could stand back and decry it while making it the center of attention.

And if politicians and their constituents were eager to yell and gawk, the news media was thrilled to fan the flames. In their desperate effort to stop the spread of deviance across America, the Republicans turned to the airwaves, the newspapers, and the magazines. Writing about sexuality in the nineteenth century, Michel Foucault might well have been describing the American cultural landscape circa 1990:

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse.

It is a pattern with which we have become familiar.



## DOGGEREL AS SERMON

People will fall over cut glass to get what you tell them they can't have.

—BRUCE ROGOW, the lead lawyer  
for 2 Live Crew, 1990<sup>12</sup>

The visual arts were just one front in the culture war. Just as elitist, state-funded art was supposedly corrupting our society, mainstream, unabashedly capitalist music was supposedly hurting our children. Fortunately, Tipper Gore was on the case.

In 1985, Gore heard her daughter listening to the Prince's gloriously perverse, deliciously nasty "Darling Nikki." Prince was at the peak of his fame, and between *Purple Rain* (the album) and *Purple Rain* (the movie), he was inescapable. Which was why children like Gore's eleven-year-old daughter Karenn were listening to a song about a nymphomaniac with the following lyrics: "I knew a girl named Nikki / I guess you could say she was a sex fiend."

Thus the Parents Resource Music Center (PRMC) was born. The PRMC proposed adding warning labels on albums considered to possess adult content and compiled a list of fifteen songs they felt epitomized their concerns, widely known as the Filthy Fifteen. Not unlike the circus that erupted during the Mapplethorpe scandal, the PRMC's proposals provoked a national uproar. A Senate hearing was held, and a diverse group of musicians went to Congress to pay tribute to freedom of ex-

pression. Twisted Sister's Dee Snider, folk musician John Denver, and art rock superstar Frank Zappa all made rather ham-fisted declarations about democracy in a pro-reality television spectacle that relied on celebrity for its appeal.

The PRMC's Susan Baker (wife of the secretary of the treasury) argued: "There certainly are many causes for these ills in our society, but it is our contention that the pervasive messages aimed at children which promote and glorify suicide, rape, sadomasochism, and so on, have to be numbered among the contributing factors." Here, again, was an expression of anxiety about American values—about the unfamiliar world the United States' children were encountering.

But most of all, the entire confrontation made for great television. How could any TV viewer resist tuning in as Snyder explained to Gore that, yes, while his band's fan club was called "Sick Mother Fucking Fans of Twisted Sister," he was nonetheless a good Christian?

For its part, the PRMC succeeded in instituting its warning labels, which, as one might guess, only helped sales. And a couple of years later, Donald Wildmon's American Family Association took a page from the PRMC playbook and turned their attention from audio to textual obscenity. Setting their sights on 2 Live Crew, Miami's most outrageous booty bass ensemble, the AFA decided that warning labels were not enough where songs like "Me So Horny" were concerned.

The lyrics to "Me So Horny" were raw and dirty. ("I

know he'll be disgusted when he sees your pussy busted / Won't your mama be so mad if she knew I got that ass?" is just a modest sample.) They objectified women and they offended common decency. But so, too, did a lot of music. Like the NEA scandal, the war between the AFA and 2 Live Crew was ultimately less about specific lyrics than about a media spectacle that combined vulgarity and condemnation. In June 1989, U.S. District Court judge Jose Gonzales declared 2 Live Crew's album obscene. Not long after, a record store owner found himself on television, in handcuffs, for selling the illicit album to an undercover agent. And after that, Luther Campbell and 2 Live Crew were arrested for performing their album in concert. For everyone but the people directly implicated, it was a win-win: you could enjoy the scolding and the object of that scolding all at once.

Patrick Buchanan failed to win the Republican nomination in 1992, and that same year, George H. W. Bush asked Frohnmayer to resign, a week after Buchanan accused the Bush administration of "subsidizing both filthy and blasphemous art." The fight over subsidized art and censorship would recede from its intense highs, but even as one culture war was coming to a close, the other, larger culture war was gaining strength. Wasn't Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow"—Bill Clinton's campaign song—not much more than an ideologically and aesthetically palatable version of "Morning in America"? Indeed, the Clinton campaign deployed culture far more aggressively than any previous politician: here, after all, was the

Democratic nominee on MTV and on Arsenio Hall, playing the saxophone while angling for the youth vote.

Culture was no longer the enemy. It was the weapon.

## DOUBLE GAME

As we've seen, the culture war was influential in part because its lessons are more ambiguous than they first appear. What took place in the late 1980s and early '90s wasn't merely a war between two cultures, but a broader realignment. A number of forces were learning to utilize the power of culture to push forward their own agendas, and their successes would be grander and more pronounced than before.

During the culture war, artists were certainly victimized—as were some of the institutions that supported them. (In the NEA's case, the damage was especially severe.) Yet at least for a time, some of those same artists also attained a fame wildly incommensurate with what they might have dreamt of at the beginning of their careers. One could argue that their fame—that onslaught of visibility—was itself a kind of turning point. Visual artists had successfully leveraged the media in the past, of course (think of Salvador Dali appearing on late-night television), but in its scale and saturation, this media attention was something new.

To put it simply, the more culture we take in, the more we as consumers become aware and accustomed to it. Generations have now grown up under a historically unique

level of cultural bombardment. A few numbers can make the point. In 1950, 9 percent of American homes had televisions; by 1959, that number had grown to 85.9 percent; and by 1978, it was at 98 percent.<sup>13</sup>

*My emphasis on scale and saturation suggests that this cultural turn wasn't bound to a particular ideology or to a rigidly defined set of heroes and villains. Or, for that matter, to a fixed understanding of intention and causality. A media executive, politician, or a cultural figure's culpability for a specific form of cultural manipulation—or a media executive's passionate belief in his or her goals—is less relevant than the effect of that manipulation. Culture is a vast dynamic imposing itself on everything from politics to media to advertising to warfare.*

This dynamic didn't emerge from nowhere: its techniques have been gradually distributed. In the next chapter, we will encounter some of this story's progenitors, including Bill Ivey, Edward Bernays, Leo Burnett, and David Ogilvy. It is hard to believe that in the early twentieth century, businesses did not rely on marketing departments, and politics hadn't yet turned into a battle between rival pollsters, focus-group organizers, and brand strategists.

These techniques understand and utilize emotion, violence, outrage, and fear. Those people and organizations who use culture toward their own ends know that the rational is no match for the affective. And we are thus quite vulnerable to the tools deployed by the most powerful forces in society.

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## THE PERSUADERS

John D. Rockefeller felt misunderstood as he looked over the newspapers spread out on his desk. The headlines read as a coordinated assault on his very personhood: he had become a monster, seemingly overnight. Only recently, he had been the savior of the American economy; now he was the villainous enemy of the American dream. His father had endured his own share of problems at Standard Oil, but now in the twentieth century, a new company had new enemies. Namely, the media, which had, with the proliferation of magazines and newspapers, become much more venomous.

The year was 1914, and a dozen people had died in an attack on striking coal miners in Ludlow, Colorado. The media had eaten it up—they were calling it the Ludlow Massacre—but Rockefeller knew it wasn't his fault. The papers didn't understand that economic growth always had