

Lary May, ed. *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1989

This collection of essays on American politics and culture in the 1950s is dedicated to the memory of the late Warren Susman, whose essay on representations of postwar America sets the tone for the volume as a whole. Susman argues that postwar culture used the family as a predominant metaphor for political relationships and developed two sets of contrasting images of home. One consisted of a commercial image of domestic bliss, vintage Hollywood. The other image was to be found, especially from 1945 to 1955, in comic books which were distributed in such volume that the production of comic books for just a part of the decade equalled the total book budgets of all the public libraries in the United States put together. According to Susman, the craze for comic books before television fulfilled any possible need to kill time should be understood as the return of the repressed, i.e. as the image of "the heroic figure who is a concerned anxious sinner capable of the most dreadful acts and incapable of operating rationally in terms of a scientific society's norms."

Thus, Americans could have it both ways. They could freely plan the repression of attitudes and ways of life that impeded the growth of consumerism as the model for all human relations. At the same time commercial and non-commercial art began to exploit the realm of mystical urges that advertising psychology had uncovered. Thus, Susman's argument throws some light on the concern of much postmodern art, such as that for instance associated with David Lynch and Eric Fischl, which is sometimes seen as a comment on the suburban style of life established in the 1950. The two-dimensional mood of the 1950s was—among other things—reflected in such instincts and urges that consumerism needed to intimate simply to keep the attention of the customers. The self-conscious art of advertising succeeded to surround even scientific product that nine out of ten doctors would want to recommend in good faith with unspeakable promises and dark forebodings. To tell the truth about bad breath is really to ruin the message.

The book originated from a conference and a series of seminars sponsored by the American Studies Program at the University of Minnesota from 1985 to 1987. Its collection of essays on various aspects of the intellectual, commercial, and minority life of the 1950s is already acknowledged as the starting point for the central issues of the period. Among the most interesting articles are the three essays on the changing political atmosphere of academic life and of the social sciences (by David Noble, Terence Ball, and Carl Schorske).