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Kirse Granat May. *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 256 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5362-7; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2695-9.

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Confessions of a Surfer Girl

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A few years ago, I co-produced a music festival in New York City, arranging the talent by telephone from my home in Los Angeles. When I arrived at the venue on opening night, one of the artists approached me and introduced himself. Having never met him before in person, I was a bit stunned he had picked me out of the crowd and asked him how he knew it was me. "Easy," he replied, "I was told to look for a typical California blonde." I remember wondering how he was able to distinguish the California variety from a Swedish, Midwestern, New York, or any other kind, and whether I should be flattered or offended. What defines the breed associated with the Golden State and how did that image reach all the way to the island of Manhattan? In *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966*, historian Kirse Granat May examines this question among other related ones, acknowledging the existence of an icon: "the California teen, a white, middle-class version of the American dream" raised in a world of "suburbs, cars, and beaches" (p. 8). In her attempt to illuminate the relationship between popular culture and place imagery, the author claims that the California Image reflected a need in American culture in the 1950s that could not be sustained once the turbulent 60s exploded. Philosophically, her approach relies on a "higher-they-rise-greater-the-fall" argument, organized by clever chapter titles and based on a description of the time period drawn from mainstream magazines, music, films, and television

shows.

The "Golden State" of May's title is interpreted for the most part to mean Southern California and Los Angeles, the place historian Merry Ovnick calls "the end of the rainbow."^[1] The last stop on the road towards Manifest Destiny, it is the land of sunshine and cinema where the utopian vision of the Good Life—and its golden sunseekers—was largely created by Hollywood's American Dream machine. The "Golden Youth" to which May refers is the famous bulge in U.S. demographics, the post-World War II baby boom generation that created an enormous market niche for consumer products. The author focuses on a timeframe bracketed by the opening of Disneyland, "The Happiest Place on Earth," in Anaheim, California, on July 17, 1955, and Republican Ronald Reagan's triumphant gubernatorial campaign in 1966. According to May, his win symbolizes the conservative backlash that promised to restore California to its previous self after the turmoil of the political protest movement in Berkeley and the Watts Rebellion in South Central LA had tarnished the state's glittering image in the mass media. This period roughly spans the boomers' transition from childhood to adolescence.

To structure her discussion, May begins by arguing that the media constructed a mythic California image and then goes on to show that the events in Berkeley and Watts, in challenging the image, led to political repercussions. About one third of *Golden State, Golden Youth*

is dedicated to the development of the positive view of the state and its young residents. Indeed, since the 1880s, when the first wave of immigration brought scores of Easterners out West, including those with powerful transportation and real estate interests, the population of Southern California and the rest of the state have continued to grow. In just over a century, Los Angeles was transformed from its beginnings as a sleepy cow town to the nation's second largest city. The sprawling, post-WWII suburban lifestyle of the Southland resulted in part from the GI Bill and federal housing and highway building programs, coupled with a surplus of cheap, affordable land. LA's infamous urban sprawl, made possible by the automobile, caught on nationwide.

According to May's research, popular magazines fueled this "California dreamin'" and the image of the Golden Youth that served as its icon. But it was Walter Elias Disney, she claims, who brought Southern California into every home equipped with a television set by the mid-1950s. The entertainment mastermind had parlayed his animated cartoons about a rodent into a youth-oriented empire centered on his Magic Kingdom. Walt's Disneyland would become both the state's most popular attraction and its most well-known and well-loved stage set, utilized for ABC's *Disneyland* TV show. The author describes in some detail the symbiotic development of both the theme park and Disney's children show, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, with its televised "meetings," giving kids all over the country the opportunity to become "mousketeers," to participate via the medium in both the family-oriented values Disney espoused and good, clean California living. Others in Hollywood also understood the buying power of the baby boom and the Golden State's draw. Films such as *Rebel without a Cause* starring James Dean, and *Gidget*, starring Sandra Dee, both set in the Southland, gave American teens two golden-haired idols and emphasized typical, middle-class, Californian pursuits: "drag racing, surfing, luaus, and joyriding" (p. 82). The surfing craze that followed was promoted further by the music of Jan and Dean, and the Beach Boys. Capitalizing on the fame of the Mickey Mouse Club's most popular mouseketeer, Annette Funicello, American International Pictures teamed her and crooner Frankie Avalon as leads in the first of a series of beach-oriented pics aimed at teenaged boomers, beginning in the summer of 1963 with the "monster-size hit" *Beach Party* (p. 125).

Up to this point in her text, May's history makes for lively and, at times, nostalgic reading, but then it becomes less convincing. By the mid-1960s, she goes on

to explain, California had become "a study in contrasts as predominant images of innocent, wholesome fun gave way to contradictions and disputes" (p. 135). May then dedicates the last two chapters of her book to the appearance of the counterculture and the "anti-image" of California's once Golden Youth, which she claims grew out of a conservative media's spin on the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the Watts riots. According to the author, the "negative" reporting helped rattle the status quo and fuel a political backlash. In the remainder of her study she attempts to show that these events "helped destroy the image of California as prosperous, untroubled land" (p. 135). Furthermore, by focusing on "the extreme negative responses" to these events, she asserts that the underlying "cultural beliefs about California's young people" (p. 135) are revealed.

May's work is valuable on two counts. First, she shows that the transition from the 1950s to the 60s was pivotal culturally and is indeed worthy of study. I would argue even more emphatically that to the rest of the world, Los Angeles did not become a real city with its own set of urban problems until this transition, when the "Burn, Baby, Burn" summer of 1965 was televised globally. However, having lived through May's time frame as a golden youth of the Golden State, and eager to read her work, I was left wanting more analysis. Thus, the real value of *Golden State, Golden Youth* is that it raises several important issues left unanswered, providing fertile material for classroom debate. What is "popular" culture and is it indeed different from plain ol' culture? What happened to spark the boomers' giant leap—mine included—from their preoccupation with disneyfied beach partying to raising serious questions about the state of the Union? Finally, why in spite of floods, fires, earthquakes, and civil unrest does California's Golden Image seem to persist?

With respect to the first issue, May bases her study on a definition of popular culture that is too limited. She calls it "entertainment created for commercial purposes and designed to appeal to the masses; it differs from the elite culture" (p. 2). While adequate for organizing her research to develop her central claim, her definition is narrow and difficult to support when seeking a greater understanding of the historical context she investigates. However, the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University (the only university graduate program in the United States dedicated to this subject matter) provides a more comprehensive meaning. According to the department, popular culture is "expressive cultural forms, specifically those that are widely disseminated in

a group (that is, that are popular), which include both products of mass media and other non-mediated aspects that characterize everyday life, such as games, holidays, breakfast cereals, and so on.”[2] This definition implies that popular culture is the culture of the times, revealing its zeitgeist, the sum of a host of collective traits.

For May, popular culture is synonymous with and limited to commercial mass entertainment, profit-oriented, media products intended for the majority instead of a small group of connoisseurs. The distinction, which needs more discussion than what she gives, is similar to the one art critics tried to make in the 1960s when distinguishing between “low” and “high” art. This notion ran counter to William Morris’s assertion made in the late 1800s that the division between popular, functional “crafts” intended for the masses and “the arts” for the elite is essentially artificial. His claim can still be supported, especially among social scientists. Furthermore, May’s definition implies that mass entertainment becomes popularized because it is designed for the masses. This begs yet another discussion as to whether an example of “popular” art, particularly one that is mass-produced or generated from a mass medium (e.g., films, television shows, magazine articles), functions largely as a cultural lamp or mirror, whether its value is in its ability to illuminate and enlighten society by serving as a change agent, or merely reflects the values and beliefs already inherent in society as a powerful reinforcing agent.

May implies that an example of popular culture, whether it is an episode of *The Mickey Mouse Club*, a film such as *Rebel without a Cause*, or a feature in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, is entertainment for the masses that gives them what they know and expect. Given the financial conservatism and profit motives of the gatekeepers of mainstream communication, it is reasonable to assume that Disney, ABC, and others of that corporate magnitude would not take risks with the enormous and highly lucrative baby-boom market. However, what this also means is that the images they generated as well as the social values inherent in them that supposedly contributed to “California dreamin’” were already well established. Thus, the media moguls merely capitalized on their power of observation and ability to give the masses what they wanted.

How, then, does something become part of popular culture? This question is essentially beyond the scope of May’s book. According to the author it is all in the hands of the mass-entertainment producer who is somehow responsible for the change in an image that re-

flects social values. Conversely, the audience (the market) determines popularity and whether something that is widely disseminated is accepted or ignored. As the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green states, “Each medium or genre has an audience that can and does make evaluations according to aesthetic criteria ... usually unarticulated, but they are no less real because of it.”[3] In the early 1960s, the times were “a-changin’” as a result of uncontrollable events and so was the baby boom. The media merely spread the word.

May admits that her intent is not to explore the causes of or issues raised by the “anti-image” events of the 60s (p. 135). But the result is a gaping hole in her *Golden State*. Granted, she is an historian and her work comes from a descriptive rather than an analytical perspective. Nonetheless, Bowling Green’s Department of Popular Culture prescribes that the study of popular materials “be done holistically, viewing them both aesthetically and also within the social and cultural contexts in which the materials are created.”[4] May clearly establishes the time frame marked by the giant baby boom, which also happened to be the first generation to grow up watching television, a medium that allowed more youth than ever before to share common experiences, even if they were mediated ones. May shows that as kids, boomers watched Disney’s *Davy Crockett* episodes about a peace-loving frontiersman. She does not mention, however, that they also saw the McCarthy witch hunt and Rosa Parks’s refusal to sit in the back of the bus on the evening news. They witnessed the inauguration of a young, U.S. President broadcast over live television. They were glued via the TV tube to the *The Twilight Zone* as well as the imagined horrors of the Cold War, the possibility of nuclear warfare, the bomb-shelter panic that followed the Bay of Pigs Invasion in the early 1960s, and the growing tensions in Southeast Asia that eventually led to the nation’s biggest and most unpopular draft call. Repeated exposure to events of the times via the fledgling medium might serve as an explanation for the change in boomers among other possible ones.

In my opinion, no study of imagery in U.S. popular culture during the 1955-1966 time frame should ignore, as May does, the widespread media coverage of two sweeping and uncontrolled (in communication theory jargon), unpredictable media events that would forever change those who lived through the times, particularly the impressionable youth. The first occurred on November 22, 1963, the date of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It was an event that “could not happen here,” yet did. Only September 11, 2001, approaches

as dark and disturbing a date in post-television U.S. history. JFK's death, pronounced by a teary-eyed Walter Cronkite on live TV, was the first and most horrific in terms of mass psychology of a string of political assassinations that would go on to take Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and other heroes of the baby-boom generation. In fact, the coverage may have helped cause the protective bubble around the idealistic California Youth image, by then symbolic of the nation's self-image, to burst.

The second event of giant media proportion occurred on February 9, 1964, about three months after President Kennedy's murder in the wake of the nation's grief and denial: the first appearance of The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* live on American television. The proximity of the two paradigmatic events, televised to a massive viewing audience, made each that much more significant. The brutal end to Camelot had shaken the nation's system of values and beliefs, upsetting the United States's image of civility both at home and abroad. Thus, the coming of Britain's unusual, yet upbeat Fab Four with their "all-you-need-is-love" and, later, "give-peace-a-chance" outlook, brought overwhelming, much-needed solace and distraction to adolescent boomers. The sense of hope and empowerment The Beatles personified, coupled with their lucky timing onto a darkened world stage, certainly helped propel their soaring popularity. Beatlemania would not just change the history of rock 'n' roll and lead to the British Invasion that would wipe America's Beach Boys from Top 40 music charts, but also unite youth worldwide by globalizing popular culture, shifting media attention away from the Golden State, and the nation it symbolized, towards Great Britain. The Beatles reinforced the new way their generation, especially college-bound boomers in the United States, were beginning to dress, wear their hair, alter their minds, and respect authority. I would argue that these two emblematic events that could not be "designed" by the producers of mass entertainment caused a shift in America's collective unconscious while serving to accelerate the process of individuation of baby boomers on the verge of adulthood.

By the time the 1970s ended, punctuated by the death of Beatle John Lennon, May shows correctly that the baby boom had long outgrown the 1960s, cut its collective hair, and was facing job and family responsibilities. "Baby boomers," she writes, "grew up with the state of California.... Sharing a time frame of influence, the generation and its adopted home state experienced a rebellious adolescence, with an eventual return to adult responsibility and a celebration of its younger days" (p. 191). Indeed,

its so-called rebellion faded as one of many short-lived attacks on an enduring icon. The California Image has always had two sides, what Mike Davis aptly calls "sunshine and noir," the title of the first chapter of his *City of Quartz*.^[5] But the dark side of this place has only served to make the golden one seem brighter.

Tim Hall, in *Urban Geography*, defines "place image" as "a set of selective impressions, generalizations and stereotypes about a locale that goes beyond geography and seems to endure despite actual changes."^[6] California has a long and bloody history of social unrest that began well before the events of the Free Speech Movement of the 1960s, which seem tame in retrospect. Examples include the slaughter of indigenous people to the point of extinction during the Spanish Mission period, the Chinese Massacre of 1870 in Downtown LA, the Zoot Suit Wars in the early 1950s, the mistreatment of Central Valley laborers that gave rise to the mighty United Farm Workers union and made Cesar E. Chavez a national hero, and the social inequities that exploded on live television not just during the Watts Rebellion in 1965 but two decades later in the violent aftermath of the Rodney King verdict.

By the mid-1950s when good, clean synchronized swimming had hit the silver screen and swimming pools across the nation, Hollywood's noir genre bared the seedy underbelly of California's good life in such mainstream films as *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *The Maltese Falcon*. TV's original *Dragnet* series, a realistic portrayal of the City of Angels that ran from 1951-1959, featured Sgt. Joe Friday of the LAPD as the city's premier crimebuster. Raymond Chandler's literary portrait of LA at the time was not much sunnier. Well before the Berkeley counterculture captured national press attention, the bohemians of the Beat Generation had set up camp in San Francisco and Venice Beach. Yet, in spite of the counter-image, the Golden State has nonetheless continued to captivate the imagination of scores of seekers of fame, fortune, and fair weather. The lure of an endless summer both literally and figuratively accounts for the status of Los Angeles as a global city and its rank today as the United States's premier port of entry.

I agree with May that California's Golden Youths are alive and well in the new millennium. However, they now constitute a new socio-political and ethnic minority. As one of the many components of the Golden State's culturally diverse "salad bowl," they are found on the pages of *Slap*, *Thrasher*, and *Skateboarding*. They are Brad Pitt

and Jennifer Aniston on the cover of *People* magazine. The popular, golden girl interpreted in the 1950s as a willful Gidget is still around, too. In a new, updated version, she reappears as Reese Witherspoon's not-so-dumb, Harvard-educated lawyer of *Legally Blonde* and *Legally Blonde 2*. She may still be a California blonde but she is taller, smarter, and more self-sufficient. She also speaks Spanish and has learned to wear sunscreen.

Notes

[1]. Merry Ovnick, *Los Angeles: The End of the Rainbow* (Los Angeles: Balcony, 1994).

[2]. Dr. Ray Browne founded the Department

of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University in 1973 after launching the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the Popular Culture Association. See the website's description of the discipline, "Popular Culture: A Background, at <http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/popc/index.html>.

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

[6]. Tim Hall, *Urban Geography* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 110.

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