

Explaining Present-Day America to Japan

Margaret Mead, the End of Trends, & “Stupid Cross-dressing Killer Werewolves”

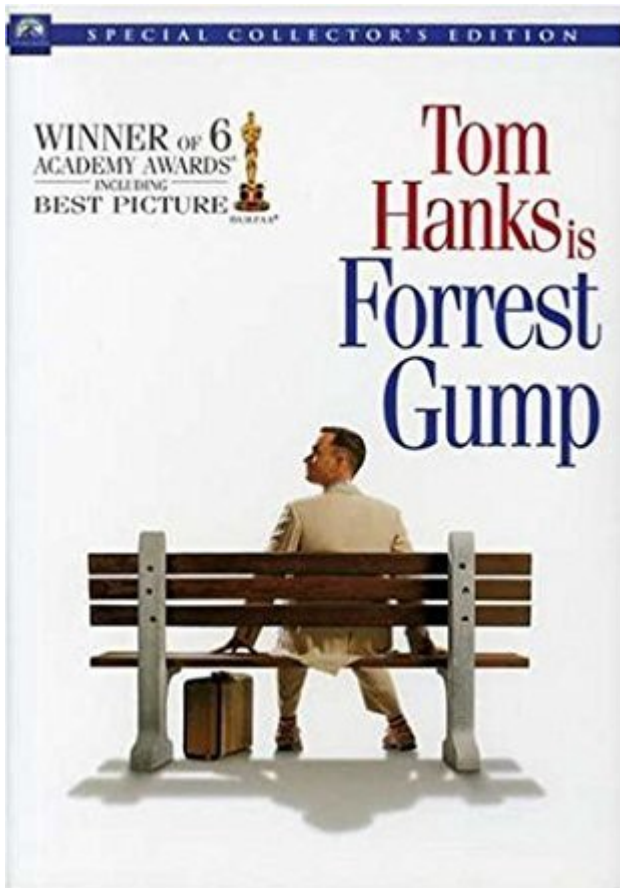


If you want to understand America today, where would you begin? You might, for example, go to the theater and watch movies Americans like to see. Why?

Movies are our shared dreams, the dream life of our culture. Up there on the big screen, you can see the themes and issues we are struggling with. Sit in the theater like a psychiatrist. Ask yourself: What do you make of America near the end of the Twentieth Century?

I. Stupid Cross-dressing Killer Werewolves (or “Category Breakdown”)

Take, for example, four films popular in the U.S. during the summer of 1994:



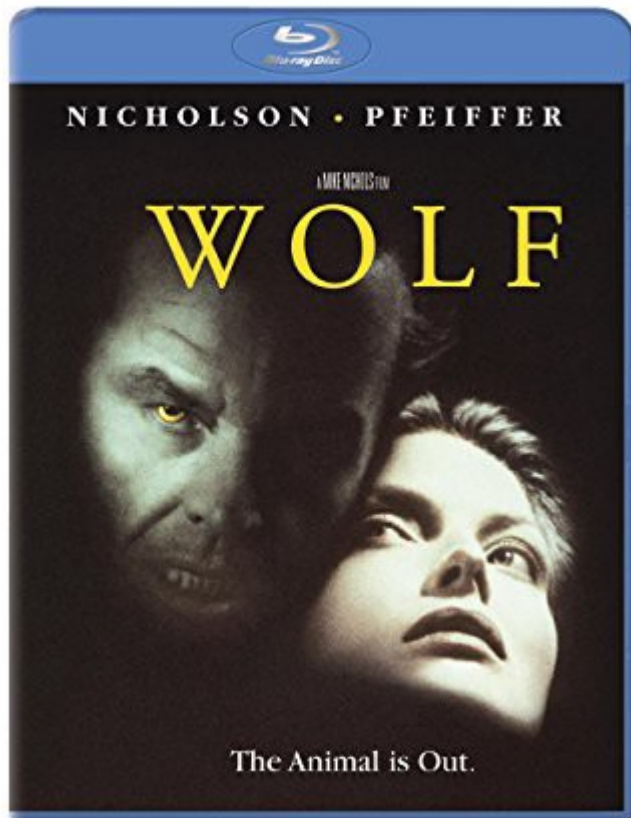
Forrest Gump. In this film, Tom Hanks plays a “simpleminded” man with a low I.Q. In very funny way, however, he turns out to be the most influential man in America during the last thirty years. For example: when he is a child, Forrest Gump wears braces on his legs and tries to dance for a guest at his mother’s boarding house, for a young man who plays the guitar; that guest turns out to be Elvis Presley and, in this way, Elvis learns to swivel his hips when he performs on stage. Later, this “stupid” man invests money in the Apple Computer Company because he thinks they sell fruit, and he becomes a millionaire. “Forrest Gump” celebrates the wise fool. The distinctions between stupidity and cleverness break down.



Mrs. Doubtfire. Robin Williams plays a character who is separated from his children by a divorce. To be near them, Williams' character disguises himself as a woman and is hired as their housekeeper. There are many funny moments in the film that are the result of Williams' cross-dressing: when Mrs. Doubtfire is cooking, for example, he/she forgets about his/her stuffed bra and her/his "breasts" catch on fire. In "Mrs. Doubtfire," like the movies "Tootsie" or "The Crying Game," the distinctions between male and female break down.



Serial Mom. Kathleen Turner plays an ideal suburban housewife who is a good cook and very concerned about her family's problems. She solves those problems by becoming a serial killer, by murdering people. When her son gets poor grades at school, she runs over his teacher with her car. When her daughter is disappointed that a boy doesn't show up for a date, Mom finds him and stabs him. And when her dentist husband is bothered by a rude patient who wants work done on the weekend, she kills him, too. What's difficult to explain is that this is a very funny film. John Waters' film is like Morita's "The Family Game." You don't know whether to laugh. You keep asking yourself: "Is that meant to be funny?" "Serial Mom" is an example of "edge humor" where the distinctions between tragedy and comedy break down.



Wolf. Jack Nicholson plays a timid businessman who is bitten by a werewolf and becomes one himself. Most of the time, he inhabits a world between his two identities. For example, when he encounters a business rival in the men's restroom, Nicholson's character urinates on the man's shoes and says, "I'm just marking my territory." Like "Beauty and the Beast" or "Splash" (where Darryl Hannah plays a mermaid), "Wolf" present a character who is half-human. The distinctions between human and animal break down.

Okay, these are enough examples to suggest what you might see if you sat in an American theater during the summer of 1994 and watched our collective dreams. What do you see? That "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" have been replaced by "Stupid Cross-Dressing Killer Werewolves"? That's not quite it.

What may already be apparent is that you frequently see a condition that can be described as "category breakdown" – a twilight world where distinctions are beginning to disintegrate, where opposite begin to intermingle: wise and foolish, male and female, adult and child, gay and straight,

tragic and comic, animal and human. Where does that “category breakdown” come from? And why is it so prevalent in our time?

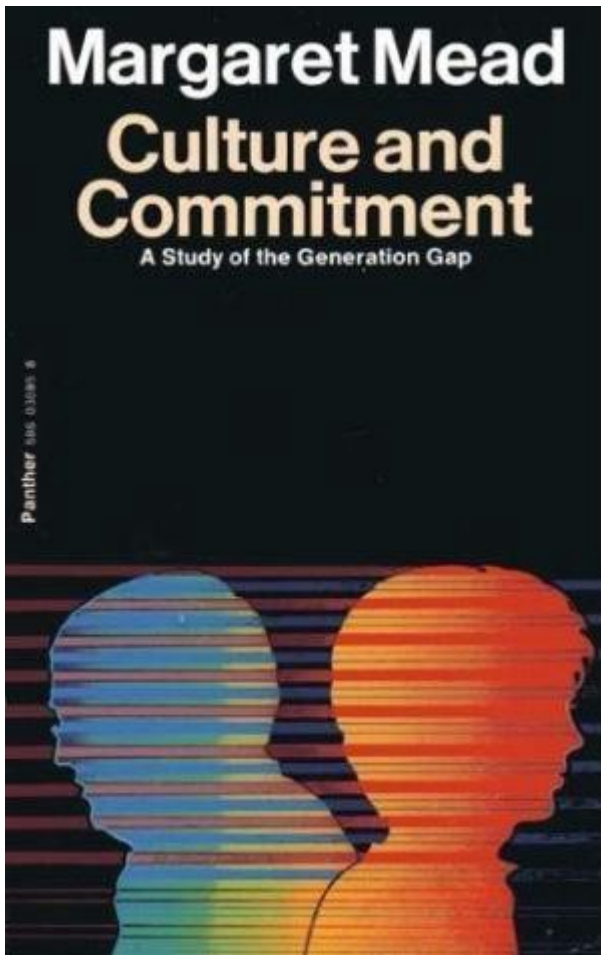
II. There Will Never Be Another Woodstock Nation (or Half Way to a Postfigurative Culture)



Margaret Mead.

Several years ago, I was in the “red light district” or “willow quarter” in Amsterdam and I happened to meet Margaret Mead, the great anthropologist. (I hasten to add that we were both there for anthropological reasons.) I was happy to have that chance meeting because it gave me the opportunity to tell her how much her book *Culture and Commitment* meant to me.

In that book, Mead says there are three kinds of cultures. **Prefigurative** Cultures where lifestyles are determined by tradition: “My grandfather made canoes. My father made canoes. I make canoes.” **Cofigurative** cultures where lifestyles are determined by one’s peers: “All my friends are wearing black leather jackets and blue jeans. I wear a black leather jacket and blue jeans.” And **Postfigurative** Cultures where an individual doesn’t follow any particular pattern but determines his or her own lifestyle: “I’m doing my own thing.”



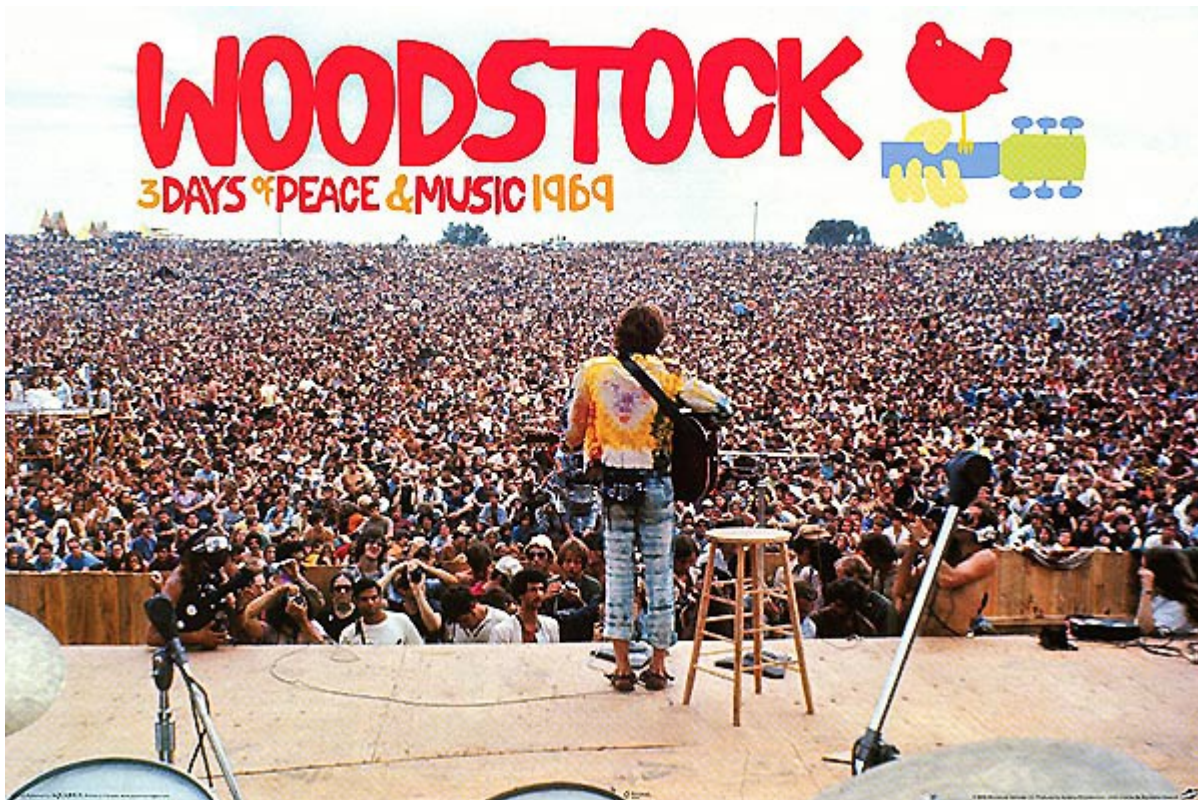
These distinctions do more than offer a way to understand different cultures in different regions. They also provide a way of understanding how cultures change over time – especially American culture.

From its beginnings to the early part of the nineteenth century, much of American culture was **prefigurative**. Tradition counted and if your ancestors were farmers, for example, chances were very good that you and your offspring would be farmers, too. The nineteenth century marked a period of transition. Tradition and parents were no longer such powerful forces. The Industrial Revolution took young men and women off the farm and sent them to the city where they took up unprecedented occupations. The waves of immigrants who came to America and those who headed west to settle the frontier were largely individuals who broke with their parents and with their past. Prefigurative culture was breaking down.

" Wild One" "was released in 1953 starring Marlon Brando. The Twentieth Century saw the rise of a **cofigurative** culture, where lifestyles are determined by peers. In the 1920's and 1930's, for example, there were "flappers" and that lifestyle pictured in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Before and during World War II, there was the Swing Era where a whole generation of young Americans danced to Benny Goodman while dressed in their zoot suits or, later, in their uniform soldiers' uniforms. Later still, in the 1950's and the Eisenhower era, conformity became a kind of national passion with everyone trying to blend in, live in a suburban tract home, and have a life like that on the television program "Ozzie and Harriet." Those who didn't want to be conformists could find their peers by becoming beatniks or by rebelling along the lines of "angry young men" like James Dean or Marlon Brando.

It seems to me that our cofigurative culture peaked in the 1960's and 1970's when the bland conformity of the Kennedy years gave way to the era of Woodstock and the Counterculture. Then, it seemed, nearly everyone of a certain generation dressed in certain ways, shared similar values, and rebelled against those who weren't their peers. It was a huge Movement because there were so many peers to share it with. "Baby Boomers," those born after World War II, constituted one third of America's population.

In the time which has followed, it seems to me, we have witnessed a gradual disintegration of a cofigurative culture. And we are beginning to see a gradual transition to a **postfigurative** culture where patternless individuality will predominate. At the moment, however, we are in a transitional phase between these two states.



Take Youth Culture. While it may sadden Baby Boomers to hear this, there may never be anything like the huge Youth Movement of the 60's and 70's, the Woodstock Nation, the Counterculture. Instead, in the 1980's and 1990's, what we have seen are mini-movements: punks, preppies, grunge, retro, etc. Mini-movements are halfway houses in the move from uniform peer cultures to category-less individuality.

This same phenomena can be seen in the way people identify themselves. There was a time, through the 1950's, when people readily described themselves as "Americans." This "assimilationist" urge was so strong that many who felt they were outside the main culture tried to "fit in." So, for example, a Mexican-American citizen named "Ernesto" might have adopted the more English-sounding name of "Ernest" and asked his friends to call him "Ernie." At the same time, the major culture made moves to bring in everyone that they felt were outsiders. During this time, for example, there was a great movement to end racial separation and to integrate schools so that black and white students could study together. The point is that many wanted to be the same thing, the same kind of American.

Now, our cofigurative culture is breaking down and slowly giving way to a prefigurative one. In this intermediate situation, this halfway state, what we now see are micro-identities or new forms of tribalism. Now, Americans are more likely to identify themselves as gay, women, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Irish-Americans, and so forth. You can see the same situation in the rise of ethnic literary works, for example, or in the appearance of movies ("Malcolm X," "Joy Luck Club," "Like Water for Chocolate," etc.) that speak to or about these segments of the population.

In other words, in this transition to the patternless individuality of a postfigurative culture, what we see are temporary solutions: the break up of large cultural movements into mini-movements, the break up of large social units into micro-identities. What we see, in other words, is another form of "category breakdown."

Of course, this is just what we noticed when we entered the movie theater and watched America's collective dreams projected on to the big screen. Now we can see that these films are symptoms of large cultural forces at work in America in the late Twentieth Century. In the American fascination with cross-dressing, werewolves, "edge humor," and the wise fool, we also see this gradual disintegration of categories.

This condition is not a failure of nerve or a symptom of decline, as right-wing critics would say. Instead, it is a reflection of the fact that we are at an intermediate phase. America has not yet arrived at the condition of a postfigurative culture – that fluid state of category-less or pattern-less individuality.

III. News Bulletin: White Boys Wearing Dreadlocks! (or The End of Trends)

"But," I hear you say, "can this postfigurative culture (this

culture of individuals) be called a 'culture' at all?" In truth, what a postfigurative culture implies is not the end of culture, but the end of trends.



Let me explain myself by way of anecdote. Last week, MTV issued a news bulletin, a fashion note: "White boys wearing dreadlocks!" Musicians in two groups, "Counting Crows" and "Big Mountain," have started wearing their hair in dreadlocks – that style of long, braided and frizzed hair, made popular by Bob Marley and Rastafarians. They started sporting this hairstyle a few months ago. The implication of this style bulletin was that other fashionable caucasians may soon be doing the same. Having been identified by MTV, this whole trend may be over in, more or less, six months.

My point is how, in this age of electronic media and immediacy, this mini-trend occurred in so short a time. A decade or so ago, this trend might have lasted for two or three years. Now, electronic bulletins are flashed from the frontline, categorized as a trend, and (having been identified) rendered passé.

Now, if you want to see what the future will be like, imagine that this trend had occurred not in six months but in six weeks – or even six days. A trend starts, word is flashed out on the computer networks, and it dies. In the future, when electronic communication is nearly instantaneous, “originality” will only last for a few moments. Eventually, it will become virtually impossible, unimportant, and obsolete.

At that moment, we will witness the death of the “avant garde,” the disappearance of trends, and end to the frenetic obligation or desire to “keep up” or “stay ahead.” In these circumstances, today’s exhausted participants in the “rat race” might issue a collective sigh of relief. But more importantly, with the end of trends, we begin to witness the birth of postfigurative culture. But what kind of “culture”?



Photo credit: Wikipedia

We might begin to frame an answer by noting that, these days, the most common method of composing music is a technique called “sampling.” Sitting at a computer, a composer can take snatches of music from here and there, slightly alter them, add them to others and come up with a piece of music. Of course, I realize that the word “composer” may be an obsolete term here; perhaps “combiner” would be more accurate. In any event, with sampling the whole notion of “originality” goes out the window and the notion of “copyright” seems an anachronism.

In a fashion, this situation resembles that of the late Middle

Ages. As T.S. Eliot suggests in his great essay "Tradition and Individual Talent," Dante was not trying to be "original" when he wrote his masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*. Instead, Dante was "syncretistic." He borrowed from various schools of philosophy and theology, from literature, from history, from his own life, and he wove all this together into an impressive whole or summary. He "sampled" and created his own thing.




Today, in bars in Tokyo or America's cities or elsewhere on the planet, you can see another kind of "sampling." You can see an extraordinary kind of eclecticism. In places that almost seem a premonition of the bar scene in "Star Wars," you will see: people wearing t-shirts that celebrate Nelson Mandela, Amazon's rain forests, or gay pride at UCLA. On the tables are Corona beers or Heineken or Kirin. On the walls are pictures of Bob Marley, Sylvester Stallone, and Brigitte Bardot. In the background you hear the sounds of the Rolling Stones, Roy Orbison, and Hiroshima. On the televisions are pictures of Michael Jackson waving goodbye in Los Angeles, a soccer game in Birmingham, and a concert at a Buddhist temple in Nara where Bob Dylan shares the stage with Yoshiki.

Call this "global culture," or even "kokusai" [internationalization], and you don't quite describe it.

Instead, you see “sampling.” You see the rise of a postfigurative culture where individuals make their own unities out of the fragments left over from “category breakdown.” In other words, in 1994, we are halfway between the peer-determined trendiness of a cofigurative culture and the eclectic individuality of a postfigurative culture. What we can begin to glimpse on the horizon is the rise of a new transnational and pluralistic personality – a condition where we may be able to echo (or “sample”) the poet Walt Whitman and say: “I contain multitudes.”

This essay originally appeared in [“The Parallel Universe of English,”](#) eds. Yoshiaki Sato and Motoyuki Shibata (U. of Tokyo Press, 1996). While meant to be a university text used in the learning of English, the book, I’m told, took on a life its own and became a bestseller in Japan.

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