



AN AMERICAN UTOPIA

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In his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, a book first published in 1972 and with which Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were no doubt both entirely unfamiliar, art historian Michael Baxandall proposed the existence of a “period eye,” a way of seeing that was specific to the culture and the period of fifteenth-century Italy that informed the ways painters represented objects and the ways viewers perceived them. In one of the book’s most virtuosic sections, Baxandall sizes up Niccolò da Tolentino’s hat (we will return to hats, given both Martin and Lewis’s manifest delight in haberdashery) in one of the three panels in Paolo Uccello’s triptych *The Battle of San Romano*, which now hangs in the National Gallery in London and is dated between 1438 and 1440. In the painting, which depicts an equestrian battle between knights and other combatants, one figure stands out from the

others, military commander Tolentino, mounted upon a white steed in the middle foreground. Although Tolentino wields a lance, it is not his weapon that draws the viewer's attention but rather the huge red and gold cylindrical fabric headpiece atop his head.

Baxandall connects the unusual size and shape of Tolentino's ballooning, oversized, turban-like hat (which may or may not have been a decorative cover for a functionally protective helmet) to the fifteenth-century learned perceptual skill of *gauging*, which was important for the primary audience for Uccello's painting during the fifteenth century, the merchant class. Baxandall explains,

It is an important fact of art history that commodities have come regularly in standard-sized containers only since the nineteenth century: previously a container—the barrel, sack or bale—was unique, and calculating its volume quickly and accurately was a condition of business. . . . An obvious way for the painter to invoke the gauger's response was to make pointed use of the repertory of stock objects used in the gauging exercises, the familiar things the beholder would have been made to learn his geometry on—cisterns, brick towers, paved floors and the rest. (86–87)

What is especially useful about Baxandall's analysis is his meticulous attention to the ways commercial factors can help determine the ways artists represent things as well as how viewers of artworks perceive those representations. Although Italian art and classic Hollywood cinema are grounded in Renaissance perspective, the ways relatively objective optical qualities are perceived and understood varied culturally and historically. (Walter Benjamin reached similar conclusions about visual perception in modernity.)

Five hundred years after Uccello and the painters of the Renaissance, Martin & Lewis worked with their own repertory of stock objects—automobiles, cigarettes, glasses, golf clubs, hats—and they relied just as much on a “period eye”—their own, as well as those of the millions who enjoyed them. If, following from Baxandall, one imagined a *period eye and ear* that were very specific to the United States from 1946 to 1956, one could begin to understand the incomparable multimedia oeuvre of Martin & Lewis. In the decade after World War II, the duo keenly developed a sensitivity to cultural vibrations, ubiquitous but bordering on the imperceptible, while practicing a kind of cultural mimicry that remediated the culture in audiovisual form.

In doing this they were of course playing to—and with—a prevailing myth of American culture at the time: harmonic prosperity.

While in England the aftermath of World War II was a bitter and extended adversity, America, especially middle-class America, prospered as never before. By 1946, the American myth involved contentment, consumption, congratulation, and confidence. If women were leaving the work force to some degree, and redomesticating the home, their familial efforts, coupled with new housing construction and, in the mid-1950s, the birth of the Interstate Highway System, led to a new regime of household glamour that involved furnishing, decoration, leisure fashion, and the automobile, not to mention, in numbers exponentially growing after the war, television sets for importing knowledge, awareness, and pleasure. Advertising burgeoned. Harmony, both fabricated and apparently natural, ruled.

It was a time in which innocence was naturalized—a state of mind and experience so widespread and pervasive in affairs both official and casual that it went without being spoken of, even without being noticed. There was certainly a peculiar innocence to the typical Martin & Lewis routine, an absence of cynicism. Here is but one telling example. There is a *Colgate Comedy Hour* skit (performed, like all *Comedy Hour* shows, before a live audience) about a problematic waiter (who will surely be Jerry): we open with Dean behind a cash register with a bucket of soup in front of him. On a blackboard behind, it says that soup is 15 cents. A crowd of customers leaves and he sighs with relief, then treats himself to a sip of the soup from a ladle. Exaggerated facial expression of disgust. (Audience chuckles.) He says, to no one in particular, that he's going to change the sign so it reads ten cents. Major, major, major explosion of laughter in the extraordinarily receptive studio audience—the best joke they've ever heard!!! In society broadly, people and things were taken to be what they claimed to be (Watergate was decades away and an advertised bowl of soup was a *good* bowl of soup). Daydream mixed with everyday perception, while people desired, while they secretly confessed, while they sipped their Manhattans and Vodka Gibsons and Whiskey Sours, while they told and cackled at jokes ribald, caustic, stereotyped, even profane. *A rabbi, a priest, and a minister walked into a bar, and the rabbi said. . .* There was as yet no buried subculture of sharp-edged critical discourse (Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl had comparatively tiny audiences), no carping jealousy and distaste, no broad resentment to kindle incendiary thoughts. Here is part of Sandra Gilbert's (b. 1936) 1984 sonnet, "The Ladies' Home Journal," looking back to the 1950s:

The brilliant stills of food, the cozy
Glossy, bygone life—mashed potatoes
Posing as whipped cream, a neat mom
Conjuring shapes from chaos, trimming the flame—
How we ached for all that . . .

The *ache* was extensive, yawning, as though everlasting. If we always wanted more we were satisfied with what we were given. It was funny enough when cigar-chomping George Burns looked askance at his beloved wife, Gracie Allen, and confided to the camera how goofy she was—we knew already. It was newsworthy enough for Dwight Eisenhower to be quoted on the noontime news (yes, news at noontime) speaking (for young TV watchers of course unintelligibly) of *détentes* and plans and forthright futures. It was lavish and luscious enough to sit in a restaurant with a linen tablecloth and slowly devour half a grapefruit with a maraschino cherry on top.

If postwar America was densely populated, at least in the cities, the myth alleged that there was never a crowd, certainly not the “lonely crowd” David Riesman pointed to, since every happy adventurer had a place to stand, room to move, and an ultra-couth etiquette that forbade barging in, elbowing, presumption, obnoxiousness, or eating your ten-inch-high chocolate cake with a spoon. Duncan Hines and Betty Crocker, the ultimate couple,¹ along with Aunt Jemima,² dictated affairs of the home; Ann Landers³ dictated affairs of the heart; motion pictures dictated melodies, singing patterns, legitimate hopes, proper love, and the colors of life. As to those colors, they dripped into curtain fabric, dresses, bathing suits, kitchen appliances, toilet seats, hand towels, soap, building exteriors, and with an astonishing panache, cars. Saturated robin’s-egg turquoise . . . apple pink . . . picnic-grass green . . . sunset

1 Betty Crocker was not a person but a publicity construct from General Mills (see Marling). Hines (1880–1959) was the author, three times a week, of the syndicated column, “Adventures in Good Eating at Home.”

2 Under the label “Aunt Jemima,” the Aunt Jemima Milling Company produced a quick pancake mix from 1889 through 2021, at which point the current ownership changed the name. The figure of the African American cook iconizing the packaging was brought to life at the Chicago Exposition of 1893 by Nancy Green.

3 The nickname “Ann Landers” was created by advice columnist Ruth Crowley in 1948 at the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

gold. (We will return to colors below.) The world of black or gray wartime automobiles was behind us, as was the technology behind the war, insofar as it could be recognized as such; much of that technology was redesigned and repackaged as gleaming, “new” consumer products. Behind us, too, at least in popular awareness, was the Great Machine—the Moloch of Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927)—because the economic queen’s chapped lips were hidden behind advertising’s lipstick. Now, according to the myth, we were inhabiting the Elysian Fields of popular culture, basking in suntan oil, waving our hair, culturing proper relationships with our neighbors who were good because we had a good white picket fence between us.

Around Dean & Jerry as they jived and jittered, crooned and cackled, cooed and kibbitzed, a sense of peace and progressive tranquility was everywhere. The forces of market capitalism were content to grind ahead methodically without infringing on the sacred territories of selfhood, family unity, and fun by pressing for urgency, speed, and untold-of profit. All that would come later, but even the thought of capital expansion was covered by comparatively small-scale development, such as the fabulous domestic architectures of Frank Lloyd Wright and Richard Neutra. It was adventure enough to take the family for a Sunday afternoon drive into the country to see the orange groves or peach trees in blossom. There was sufficient festival in the official holidays, added to which were intensive commercializations of Mother’s and Father’s Days for good measure. Spring Break from college was not yet; easy air travel was not yet; standby fares were not yet; and you could still wander into The Automat and for one single nickel get what was indisputably a “good cup of coffee.”

Not that there was no luxury. Luxury was for the movie stars. Designer of, among many, many films, *Gaslight* (1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Easter Parade* (1948), and Doris Day’s gowns in *Midnight Lace* (1960), Irene Lentz Gibbons (who went professionally as Irene) was implored by Bullock’s Wilshire to open a salon there, and she was given a palatial space with doric columns and enough carpeted emptiness between the thickly upholstered lounge chairs for a Broadway chorus to dance out her new fashions. In Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), Grace Kelly’s Lisa could, with perfect aplomb and no more excitement than in checking a new shade of lipstick, have lunch for two delivered from “21,” uniformed waiter included. Movies consistently showed brave people undertaking big-time exploits, or lovers falling in love as lovers do, or marriages in which a husband and wife, occupying some vast thickly carpeted and sleekly upholstered

zone, and splayed, of course, upon matching twin beds (the Motion Picture Production Code was in effect until 1966), squabbled over something that would very shortly turn out to be nothing. Horror films were small in number if preposterous, science-fiction films generally projected a sterile future (some of the best based on sleek artistic renderings by Chesley Bonestell), and most westerns showed the triumph of horseback-riding white cowboys.

The age was an image of itself, an image that by now has become (only) a caricature.⁴ What might seem astonishing today, in our age of photorealism, is that most graphic expression in the public domain was handled by skilled artists using their hands to make drawings or paintings. Advertising images in magazines were still very largely hand-drawn; posters were printed from hand-made paintings; greeting cards showed the telltale hand of the artist, the one who knew without a thought how to draw snow-laden pines settled in gentle snow-covered nooks nearby a gentle white country church. One saw photographic images in the front vitrines of movie theaters, ballyhooing the film currently on show (and usually with stills specially prepared for the purpose, sometimes hand-colored). Here, and with all styles of animation and abbreviation far and wide, the presumption was that the viewer would be able to fill in the gaps from a generally shared storehouse of knowledge about the world as defined in the culture. One group of viewers, one vast audience, pitching together into one deep well of knowledge, doubt, understanding, and questioning. The bubbles on cartoons could be abbreviated; the drawings themselves could be abbreviated; everybody knew how to leap to the unstated meaning, which artists and advertisers considered too verbose or too complex or too frenetic to fully include in the presentation. The “meaning” of pop culture certainly did not promise to be some dark and troubling secret.

For life taken generally, then, the myth affirmed that everything was good and everybody was happy, more or less—everybody was at least content or without the fervor to scream for change (with the McCarthy hearings this fundamental tenet came into the spotlight). Everybody presumably had their own safe place, however modest or palatial, their own room to move, and the universally affirmed etiquette in the West was that you didn’t barge into other

4 Some readers may need to be reassured that contemporary takeoffs on the 1950s today are generally devoid of actual cultural reference: they are made by people, and they star people, far too young to have tasted the time.

people's space, you didn't race to grab before they could the goodies they had set their hearts upon: there were goodies enough for all. (Hitler grabbed and pushed; the U.S.S.R. grabbed and pushed; we did not, on both sides of the 49th Parallel.) Courtesy was everywhere, in place of angst, tension, conflict, loathing, bloodshed (so that, just as in the days of early Hollywood chronicled inimitably by Kenneth Anger, bloody crimes were rare and spectacular enough to gain notoriety, not the meat of everyday entertainment). Somewhere, somehow, there existed a wise ruling body that organized things for the benefit of all, for what Robert K. Merton and other structural-functional sociologists of the time regarded as a coherent and stable society, not very unlike the domain of which Voltaire's Pangloss touted, "All's for the best in this best of all possible worlds."⁵

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Such a beautiful world!, where the sun is always shining! Were there also fears, horrors, anxieties, pains, and troubles, not so shiny and not so much fun? The answer is, that if these darkneses existed they were kept inside, locked away. In short, utopia required that dystopia be repressed. Repressed, repressed, and thoroughly repressed . . .

And two young performers stumbled onto a stage together and pointed to it. Opened the gateway so that the repressed could return . . .

What, we must ask, happens when the repressed returns? *The repressed*: not an armory for destruction and the infliction of agony, not an eraser, not a discomfiting probe, but instead a kind of energy source, a creative irritation, that blurred the boundaries between things, rubbed off the labels, stood people on their heads, warped language, blurred expression anywhere and everywhere regardless of propriety and good form.

And what if the repressed showed up as a kind of marriage, between movement and cacophony on one side and harmonic poise on the other, between the need never to be interrupted and the urgent need to just get a word in edgewise . . .

5 Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* was first performed in 1956.

All of this very much in the light, available for all to catch, on a stage, on a movie screen, on the pages of a vastly circulated magazine, in posters, in comic books, on the radio. A repressed that returned to take over show business.

But when we call Martin & Lewis the *biggest* thing in show business, what can we possibly mean? Show business: not just movies, not radio, not television, not magazines, not newspapers, not posters, not record albums . . . BUT ALL OF IT! However commonplace or dilute a referent the 1950s may have become, however much decades taken in themselves might be thought a historiographically suspect grouping that posits some kind of internal coherence on the basis of sheer decimal coincidence, here we propose to examine the idea that something meaningful in the atmosphere of our culture occurred between one July night in 1946 and another in 1956. At the same time, there is nothing approximate in designating a decade of Martin & Lewis as a timespan of perfect, mathematically bounded precision.

In looking at Dean & Jerry we face backward with a very keen attention to a warning proposed by Stephen Jay Gould, who felt it urgent to avoid what he called “Whiggish history,”

the idea of history as a tale of progress, permitting us to judge past figures by their role in fostering enlightenment *as we now understand it*. (*Time’s Arrow* 4; emphasis added)

Gould goes on to quote Herbert Butterfield’s proscription against imagining that history “can give us judgments of value—against assuming that this ideal or that person can be proved to have been wrong by the mere lapse of time” (105–6; qtd. in Gould *Time’s Arrow* 5).

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Considering their development as individual performers before 1946 and their solo work after the 1956 break-up, one finds in the collaborative work a strange tension between a relentless, sometimes explosive spontaneity and a dominating (sometimes condescending) calm, a jerky, surprising, breathtaking unpredictability and an easygoing, even lazy swagger. On television, their on-camera takes were, daringly, often only marginally rehearsed, and dependent to a large degree on their sensibilities at the working moment. On film sets, where considerable forethought and arrangement are necessary, for

financial reasons and on account of film's intensively collaborative nature, they still performed with some degree of spontaneity and improvisation.

Since Dean & Jerry stopped working together, there has never, to this day, appeared anyone in front of an audience to match them. Not by way of any medium. Not only are Martin & Lewis gone, but the culture that yearned for them and fed upon them is gone, too. A culture that is the progenitor of our own, though more generous, forgiving, eager, and unspoiled, and hungry to eat them up.

The Beatles were right: what you get depends entirely on what you give. What we take from Martin & Lewis, together or singly, depends a lot on how we *read* them, as indicators, as symbols, as figureheads, and as human beings; depends on our frame of mind before the performance commences and all through the internal agonies as it bumps, falls, glides, careens, or races along. What, indeed, does it mean to *read*—or gauge—in a case like this (not that there are any other cases in this category)? For considering a performative duo like Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, what sensibility, consciousness, dream-state, relaxation, and spontaneity might be both useful and required? If we were to think about Dean & Jerry, would our thinking imagine them constituting a solid object, with sides and boundaries? A single organism with limbs jutting in several different directions? A legal document with a beginning, middle, and end? Or something more akin to an apparently boundless ocean of performative power, which can be considered only one wave at a time? Given that by now Dean & Jerry have been dropped from daily currency and are rendered, if at all, as ghosts of what they once were, how can we reasonably think about them otherwise than in an apparently discontinuous and respectfully wacky way? Further, are we to think of *Dean and Jerry* or *Martin & Lewis* as a single, fused being, as a pair of individual pieces bound together by contract, love, or what have you, or as only a superficial figuration in the public's mind?

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No performers had ever been so conscious of marketing, of what we would today call cross-platforming, of merchandising the self, of licensing rights to the self, and of hitting audiences across all conceivable entertainment markets more or less at one time: stand-up stage acts, recordings both solo

and together, radio broadcasting, television, motion pictures, comic books, coloring books, coffee mugs, cuff links, decals, glue, playing cards, puppets (including a two-faced model with Dean's face on one side and Jerry's on the other), salt-and-pepper shakers, sheet music, tape dispensers, and more.⁶ Frank Krutnik testifies to the astoundingly swift rise of the duo, and the extensive width of their popularity:

The speed with which Martin and Lewis attained such prominence was quite remarkable. So, too, was the range of audiences they persuaded to embrace their wild, bewitching liveness—from the sophisticated urbanites who applauded them in the clubs, to the families who watched them on TV, to their ardent and occasionally hysterical young fans. Norman Taurog, director of five of the team's films, testifies to the excessive emotions they could inspire among their young enthusiasts. During their record-breaking two-week engagement at New York's Paramount Theater in July 1951, the streets were jammed with teenagers. ("Sex" 111)

It hardly mattered, from the time of the American entry to World War II onward, what you wanted to do in your spare time, Dean & Jerry would be there doing it with you. And one paid for them to do it. They were money, big money, big big big big money.

If our culture has developed an obsession with box office figures, comparing weekend grosses as if they were sports scores and using them as some sort of a measure of a film's success, we prefer not to play that game. Not only are historical box-office figures notoriously inaccurate, even if reliably accurate numbers were available we are not entirely confident those numbers would provide any measurable account of the magnitude of space that Martin & Lewis occupied in American culture and the American popular imagination. Let us say, when the fireworks go off in front of you, you're way beyond counting the sparkles: Dean's sparkles, Jerry's sparkles, Dean & Jerry's twin sparkles!

One tiny indicator of how popular and recognizable Dean & Jerry were is in the opening skit from the June 24, 1951, *Comedy Hour*: a group has gathered at the airport to welcome "Martin & Lewis," but when the eagerly awaited stars get off the airplane, they're *Tony* Martin and *Joe* Louis—the extremely

6 Jeffrey Alan Brodrick, "Jerry Lewis Collectibles," <http://jerrylewisunauthorized.com/jlcollect.html>; Brodrick, telephone conversation with Solomon, February 5, 2023.

popular nightclub singer (married to Cyd Charisse) and the world heavy-weight boxing champ.⁷ When Martin & Lewis arrive soon after, it's utterly anticlimactic, the joke being that Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis are not such a big deal. Audiences quickly grasp that while Dean might have been able to go fifteen rounds with Tony verse by verse, Jerry against Joe would have lasted about ten seconds. Indeed, when Joe barely tickles Jerry with his glove, "the wimp" immediately drops to the stage in a messy heap.

(The beauty of that: [i] that Jerry transitions from standing straight up to being a bundle on the floor in a quarter of a second; [ii] that what happens is precisely what one would expect to happen, *but bigger*, Joe barely tickling instead of punching, Jerry not just reeling but entirely disappearing from view.)

A similar riff characterizes the December 30, 1951, *Colgate Comedy Hour* broadcast in which an assembled roomful of children at the "Birdwheel Public School" are totally uninterested in the two celebrities to whom their teacher introduces them so excitedly. Dean & Jerry tell a few jokes, but the children do not laugh—Jerry asks if this is a "midget Nuremberg trial." "What's-all-the-big-deal-about?" moments like these serve well to reinforce that Dean & Jerry are absolutely a big deal; the biggest deal imaginable at that time, in fact exactly a deal big enough to make self-deprecating jokes about itself. Only a very big deal can look in the mirror and say, "So?" An audience of around 29 million viewers watched them on television at this time (Hayde 130). In America there were some 152 million souls. Thus, roughly one in five living Americans were watching Dean & Jerry on the *Colgate Comedy Hour*.

A market share to be envied, no doubt. But there are curious and provocative ways in which everything about Martin & Lewis spurred envy. Envy, frenzy, confusion, delirium. In order to touch their madness it helps to have a little madness in your own fingertips.

7 A version of a gag they had performed on their October 21, 1949, radio broadcast with guest George Jessel.