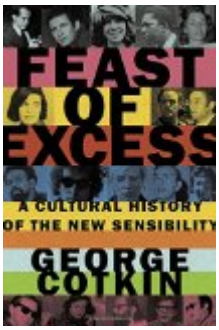
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**George Cotkin.** *Feast of Excess: A Cultural History of the New Sensibility.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 448 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-021847-8.

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When I was an undergraduate, a sagacious old professor told me that the birth control pill was the greatest milestone in human history. For a brief, blissful twenty years, he said, mankind enjoyed an unprecedented window of disinhibition, of seemingly cost-free sex—at least until HIV came along. That wistful reminiscence might seem like the nostalgia of an old man—an occupational hazard of thinking or writing about the 1960s—but it reveals something real. The decade brought with it a combustible mix of demographic change, political radicalism, and avant-garde arts and music that cannot be ignored, however annoying the anodyne memories of baby boomers *who were there* might be.

A younger generation of historians has emerged to tell the story of the 1960s, with works such as Doug Rossinow's *Politics of Authenticity* (1998) or John McMillian's *Smoking Typewriters* (2011) providing a fresh take on the era. This trend has had an altogether salutary effect on scholarship, since today's historians enjoy a greater distance from the subject than, say, Sixties veterans like Todd Gitlin or Greil Marcus. *Feast of Excess*, the new book by George Cotkin, a professor emeritus at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, tries to thread the needle of scholarship and memory by providing a kaleidoscopic view of radical arts, literature, and music in postwar America. The historian's zest and verve for the material under consideration is evident in every lively page of the book, and how could it not be? Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Bob Dylan, Erica Jong—the book indeed offers a veritable smorgasbord of compelling historical personalities.

*Feast of Excess* purports to be "a cultural history of the New Sensibility," a term coined by the fierce cultural critic and essayist Sontag in (amazingly) *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1965. Journalist Tom Wolfe also picked up the phrase, employing it in his book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). For Cotkin, the New Sensibility serves as an elastic term for a wide range of defiant art in the mid-twentieth century, ranging from the mind-numbingly boring films of

Andy Warhol to the extreme performance art of Chris Burden, who had an assistant shoot him in the arm and even endured crucifixion as part of his work. The New Sensibility was all about pushing limits, transgressing boundaries, and doing *more* than anyone before.

Cotkin's New Sensibility thus embraces the outrageous comedy of Lenny Bruce, which challenged the limits of decency and propriety; the music of Bob Dylan and John Coltrane; the sexual honesty and inhibition of Gore Vidal and Eric Jong in *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) and *Fear of Flying* (1973), respectively. The book opens with a meditation on John Cage and his historic work *4'33"* (1952), the radically minimalist composition that consisted of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence (sort of). "The New Sensibility endorsed the notion of 'thinking about the unthinkable,'" Cotkin argues, alluding to theorist Herman Kahn's urgent insistence that man consider the real and practical implications of nuclear conflict (p. 5). Music without music, art as actual, physical suffering—all fell under the broad rubric of extreme experience, in Cotkin's interpretation of the era.

*Feast of Excess*'s greatest strength is its breadth of vision, the fact that the author is able to bring a wide range of seemingly disparate and unrelated characters into one rich, historical pageant. For those interested in Sontag, Jong, or Thomas Pynchon, the book offers a heaping helping of cultural context, nuance, and detail. Each chapter, in fact, is focused on one or two artists and writers, encompassing everyone from Jerry Lee Lewis to Diane Arbus. The book unfolds in a series of quasi-biographical snapshots, and each segment could stand as an essay in its own right.

The book's strength is also its weakness, though—its capaciousness is almost a defect. What do Dylan, Arbus, Allen Ginsberg, and Patricia Highsmith really have to do with each other, except that they made their signature accomplishments in roughly the same time period? Cotkin is well aware of the problem of periodization, and gamely makes an attempt to adjudicate modernism versus postmodernism and the relationship of the two terms to the New Sensibility. The movement "was about excess, exaggeration, pushing limits, embracing the popular, and going too far in style and spirit"—indeed, Sontag originally linked it to an embrace of popular culture (her love of the Supremes and Dionne Warwick), along with an erasure of boundaries between so-called high and low culture (p. 7). Sontag wrote memorably about camp and taking culture for what it is, without imposing a sophisticated apparatus of criticism or theory on it.

In this regard, it is hard not to see the commercial appropriations of Warhol or the catholic taste in pop culture of Sontag as anything but the early emanations of postmodernism. Why, then, does the New Sensibility earn its own place in history, as something distinct from modernism or its poorly understood stepchild? Modernists pushed boundaries and struck out defiantly—could one not write a book about Marcel Duchamp or Ezra Pound called *Feast of Excess*? The same could be written about Patti Smith or the Sex Pistols in the 1970s or Cindy Sherman or Jean-Michel Basquiat in the 1980s. Why do the 1960s and its cast of characters deserve special attention, as if pushing the limits was a phenomenon unique to that time? *Feast of Excess* works as a panoramic portrait of American life in the early postwar years, and it will provide a sumptuous literary serving for anyone interested in culture of the period.

In the end, the book offers a look not so much into the avant-garde, but the trajectory of American culture in the late twentieth century. If creative people such as Burden, Jong, and Vidal aimed to explode conventions and shock their audiences, their progeny turned out to be Jerry Springer and *I Didn't Know I Was Pregnant* (2009-11). As Cotkin points out, the famous film critic Pauline Kael was despondent at seeing what her generation had wrought: "When we champi-

oned trash culture, we had no idea it would become the *only* culture" (p. 12). Today we may be enjoying the table scraps and leftovers from the feast of excess.