

Images of Culture

From multiculturalism to generative AI

CHAINS

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“The ‘end of History’ is of course code for the ‘end of the Social’. Multiculturalism is the decor of the end of the Social... And what will the consumer consume? Images of culture.”

— Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Against Multiculturalism*

Few phrases from Peter Lamborn Wilson’s *Against Multiculturalism* feel more prescient today than “images of culture.” More than three decades after its publication, the phrase seems to have acquired a new historical weight. It is one of those formulations that appears almost self-explanatory until one begins to ask why it is phrased in precisely that way. Wilson does not write simply of culture. Nor does he write of representations, symbols, identities, or ideologies. He writes of images of culture.

The distinction appears slight. It may, in fact, be the entire essay.

An image always implies something other than itself. It points toward, stands in for, remembers, advertises, aestheticizes, commodifies, or preserves something that exceeds the image itself. However faithful or dishonest its relationship to its subject, an image remains an image. Culture, by contrast, resists such reduction. It exists first as relationship: in conversations that leave no archive, in obligations that cannot be measured, in habits inherited without instruction, in neighbourhoods, kitchens, ceremonies, jokes, grief, repair, hospitality, conflict, memory, and the countless forms of association through which people come to inhabit a shared world. Much of culture resists representation precisely because it exists socially before it exists symbolically.

Human societies have always produced images of themselves. Every culture leaves behind stories, monuments, paintings, rituals, maps, myths, and histories through which it attempts to understand itself. Wilson’s concern is therefore not the existence of images, but the changing relationship between images and the social life from which they emerge. His question, as I understand it, is deceptively simple: what happens when images begin to replace the relationships they once represented?

This is where *Against Multiculturalism* continues to matter. The essay is frequently received as an argument about multicultural policy, yet what gives it lasting significance may be something more fundamental. Wilson identifies a transformation in the way institutions encounter culture. Culture increasingly appears not primarily as lived practice, but as something that can

be recognized, represented, categorized, and administered. Recognition and participation are not opposites. Recognition may make participation possible just as participation may demand recognition. Yet there remains an important distinction between them. Recognition can acknowledge a relationship. It cannot produce one.

This distinction has become strangely difficult to articulate within contemporary political life because questioning the sufficiency of representation is often mistaken for questioning representation itself. They are not the same thought. A photograph of neighbours repairing a fence together is not the repair. A documentary about mutual aid is not mutual aid. A museum exhibition about migration is not migration. Each may preserve something essential. Each may deepen understanding. Each may be politically necessary. None, however, is identical to the relationships from which it emerged. The problem begins not with representation itself, but when representation comes to appear sufficient.

Wilson's phrase returns.

Images of culture.

Read today, it feels less like a description of multiculturalism than a description of mediation itself.

The internet appears almost immediately—not because Wilson anticipated social media or generative AI, but because the question he asks seems to migrate effortlessly into the infrastructures that would come to organize contemporary cultural life. The early internet was imagined as an unprecedented expansion of human association, capable of exceeding national borders, institutional gatekeepers, and centralized forms of cultural production. Whether this promise was ever fully realized is perhaps less important than the horizon it opened. Digital networks appeared capable of supporting collaboration, federation, communication, and the construction of commons organized through relationships rather than centralized authority.

Tiziana Terranova asks us to reconsider that horizon by shifting attention away from the network as technological possibility and toward the political economy through which it developed. Her concern is not whether the internet succeeded or failed, but the conditions under which it became organized. What kinds of digital networks become economically and politically possible once communication infrastructures are increasingly shaped by capital? The question is no longer simply what people do with networks. It becomes a question of the infrastructures that organize the possibilities of participation themselves.

Wilson's phrase begins to unfold in another direction. If institutions once governed images of culture through administrative forms, platform capitalism reorganizes the infrastructures through which those images circulate. Culture increasingly appears through platforms whose economic logic depends upon visibility, engagement, circulation, and continuous production. This transformation is now so ordinary that it risks disappearing from view. Platforms no longer ask us merely to consume images of culture. They increasingly require us to produce them. Identity becomes performative because performance is rewarded. Belonging becomes circulatory because circulation becomes the condition of visibility. Participation itself begins to orient toward the production of images.

The significance of this shift extends beyond social media. Increasingly, images of culture cease to function merely as representations of culture; they become the primary means through which culture is encountered. Most people experience cultures beyond their own first through images—through journalism, advertising, cinema, museums, tourism, streaming platforms, education, social media, and digital networks. Lived participation remains possible, but it is no longer

the dominant mode through which cultural difference is publicly encountered. Images of culture become the principal interface through which society understands itself.

Once this occurs, the politics of image production can no longer be treated as secondary to the politics of culture. The images do not exhaust culture, but they increasingly determine the conditions under which culture becomes publicly recognizable. They shape what appears familiar or foreign, ordinary or exceptional, authentic or artificial. They organize the horizon of cultural imagination long before lived relationships have an opportunity to complicate those appearances.

Generative AI enters this history not as a rupture but as another transformation in the production of images of culture. Much contemporary discussion asks whether AI produces culture. I suspect this is the wrong question. Generative AI does not produce culture. It produces images of culture. The distinction matters because it shifts attention away from the technology itself and toward the conditions under which those images are imagined, produced, circulated, and encountered.

Commercial image generation makes visible something that has long existed but rarely appeared so explicitly. Images increasingly begin with specifications. “Diverse.” “Authentic.” “Inclusive.” These words appear alongside instructions concerning composition, wardrobe, lighting, atmosphere, camera movement, or lens choice. They function simultaneously as ethical commitments and production parameters. What had previously existed as editorial judgment, casting practice, market research, or institutional convention becomes translated into operational specification. The prompt becomes a curious document. It does not simply describe an image. It establishes the conditions under which particular images of culture become imaginable.

Representation matters precisely because images of culture increasingly mediate public life. For that reason, the question is not whether diversity, inclusion, or authenticity should appear within images. The more interesting question concerns the changing relationship between institutions and representation once representation becomes operational. The prompt reveals the moment at which institutional values are translated into technical instructions. It renders visible a process that has often remained diffuse within earlier forms of cultural production.

In one respect, generative AI is remarkably revealing. Its statistical biases frequently expose patterns already embedded within the societies from which its training data emerged. Before those patterns are corrected, filtered, or refined, they reveal distributions that institutions are often compelled to confront. This moment of visibility is brief. Commercial production rarely ends there. Images are revised. Prompts are refined. Representations become aligned with ethical, legal, commercial, and political expectations. These interventions are often thoughtful and undertaken in good faith. Their significance lies elsewhere. Generative AI makes newly visible the point at which institutional values become operationalized within the production of images of culture.

Wilson worried that institutions increasingly mediated culture through images. Terranova demonstrated how capital reorganized the infrastructures through which those images circulated. Generative AI extends this trajectory into the production of the images themselves. The question is therefore no longer simply who produces images of culture, nor even who circulates them, but how the infrastructures through which those images are produced shape what culture becomes publicly recognizable, imaginable, and ultimately thinkable. Mark Fisher’s account of *capitalist realism* offers a useful companion here, not because it explains artificial intelligence, but because it reminds us that power increasingly operates by delimiting the horizon of what can be imagined. If capitalist realism narrows the field of political possibility, then the infras-

tructures through which images of culture are produced increasingly participate in shaping the boundaries of cultural imagination as well.

Questions of culture have never been settled by technological change alone, nor is there reason to believe they will be now. Yet if images of culture increasingly constitute the primary means through which culture is encountered, then the infrastructures governing their production deserve philosophical and political attention equal to that once given to the institutions that governed their circulation. Wilson's phrase, written decades before platforms and generative AI, has only become more urgent. The question it leaves us with remains unresolved: what forms of social life become more difficult to perceive when images of culture increasingly mediate our encounter with culture itself, and what kinds of technological practices might deepen our capacity to perceive the relationships from which culture emerges rather than merely produce new images of it?

Notes:

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009). Fisher argues that contemporary capitalism increasingly presents itself as the only imaginable political and economic horizon. The argument here extends that insight into the realm of cultural mediation, suggesting that the infrastructures through which images of culture are produced increasingly shape what becomes culturally imaginable.
2. Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Against Multiculturalism*, The Anarchist Library.
3. Tiziana Terranova, *After the Internet: Digital Networks between Capital and the Common* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2022).
4. This essay forms part of an ongoing body of research published through Chainshardcore, an independent writing project exploring artificial intelligence, synthetic reality, cultural infrastructure, and practices of perception. <https://chainshardcore.substack.com>

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