

Chapter 11: Anglo-American Popular Culture and Technology, 1920-1945

Introduction

Between 1920 and 1945, popular culture in Britain and the United States underwent a **dramatic transformation**, influenced by technological advancements, economic prosperity, and later, the hardships of World War II. The period saw the rise of **Hollywood cinema, jazz, radio, mass advertising, and consumer culture**. Technological innovations such as **radio broadcasting, automobiles, and early computing** reshaped daily life. Despite the challenges of the Great Depression and WWII, Anglo-American culture remained influential worldwide.

1. The Rise of Hollywood and the Film Industry

The Golden Age of Hollywood (1920s-1940s)

- **Hollywood became the global centre of filmmaking.**
- Major studios controlled production, including **Warner Bros., MGM, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, and RKO.**
- Introduction of the “**star system**” - actors like **Charlie Chaplin, Greta Garbo, and Clark Gable** became household names.

The Introduction of Sound (1927)

- **The Jazz Singer (1927)**, starring **Al Jolson**, was the first “**talkie**” film.
- By 1930, silent films were largely obsolete.
- **Musicals, gangster films, and comedies** became highly popular.

The Hays Code (1930-1968)

- Introduced **moral censorship** in Hollywood films.
- Banned excessive violence, nudity, and “**immoral**” behaviour.
- Limited how **crime and relationships** were depicted on screen.

British Cinema

- Less dominant than Hollywood but produced notable directors like **Alfred Hitchcock.**
- British films like *The 39 Steps* (1935) gained international success.
- WWII films like *In Which We Serve* (1942) boosted morale.

2. The Impact of Radio and Music

The Growth of Radio (1920s-1940s)

- **1920:** First commercial radio station, **KDKA in Pittsburgh**, began broadcasting.
- By 1930, over **60%** of American households had a radio.
- **BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)** founded in 1922, became a major cultural force.
- **Radio serials** (e.g., *The Lone Ranger, The Shadow*) became hugely popular.

- **Fireside Chats:** President Franklin D. Roosevelt used radio to address the nation during the Great Depression.

The Jazz Age and Swing Music

- **Jazz** became the dominant music genre of the 1920s, led by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.
- **Swing music (1930s-1940s):** Led by artists like Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller.
- Jazz was controversial due to its African American roots and association with dance culture.
- Britain saw a rise in **dance halls and swing bands.**

3. Literature and the Rise of Mass Media

Modernist Literature

- **F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925):** Captured the excesses of the Jazz Age.
- **Ernest Hemingway:** Focused on themes of war and disillusionment (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929).
- **George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945):** Political satire on totalitarianism.
- **Virginia Woolf and James Joyce:** Innovated with **stream-of-consciousness writing.**

The Influence of Newspapers and Magazines

- **The Daily Mail and The Times (UK)** shaped public opinion.
- **Life magazine (USA, founded 1936)** revolutionised photojournalism.
- **Propaganda in WWII:** Newspapers controlled war messaging, reinforcing patriotism.

4. Consumer Culture and Advertising

The Rise of Advertising

- **Radio and newspapers** became key platforms for **advertising.**
- **Coca-Cola, Ford, and Lucky Strike** became **major brands.**
- **Slogans and jingles** became common marketing tools.
- **Billboards and neon signs** in cities like **New York and London** reflected consumer culture.

The Growth of Department Stores and Mass Production

- **Macy's (New York) and Selfridges (London)** became shopping destinations.
- **Mass production led to cheaper goods,** making consumer products accessible to the middle class.
- **Women increasingly became the primary consumers,** as household appliances became widespread.

5. Technological Advancements (1920-1945)

The Automobile Industry

- **Henry Ford's assembly line (1913)** revolutionised car production.
- By 1929, one in five Americans owned a car.
- The UK's Austin and Morris produced affordable vehicles.
- Highways and motels developed as car travel became common.

The Development of Aviation

- **Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight (1927)** increased interest in aviation.
- **Commercial airlines (Pan Am, British Airways)** expanded rapidly.
- **Aircraft played a key role in WWII, from bombers to fighter planes.**

Early Computing and Communications

- **Alan Turing** developed the first computing concepts in the UK.
- **Radar (1935, developed by Robert Watson-Watt)** revolutionised warfare.
- **Television emerged (BBC first broadcast in 1936).**

6. Sport and Leisure in Anglo-American Society

The Rise of Professional Sports

- **Baseball** dominated US sports, with **Babe Ruth** becoming a national hero.
- **American football and basketball** gained popularity.
- **Boxing legends like Joe Louis and Jack Dempsey** drew global audiences.
- The **FA Cup** and **Wimbledon** made **football** and **tennis** central to British sport.

The Olympic Games

- The **1936 Berlin Olympics** were used as **Nazi propaganda**.
- **Jesse Owens**, an African American athlete, won four gold medals, defying Hitler's racial theories.

7. The Impact of World War II on Popular Culture and Technology

War Propaganda in Film and Music

- Films like **Casablanca (1942)** and **Mrs Miniver (1942)** promoted Allied unity.
- **Swing music** was used to boost morale among soldiers.
- **Cartoons (Disney, Warner Bros.)** featured anti-Nazi themes.

Wartime Technological Developments

- **Penicillin** (discovered by **Alexander Fleming** in 1928) mass-produced during WWII.
- **Jet engines** and **radar** advanced aircraft capabilities.

- The **Manhattan Project** (1942-1945) developed the **atomic bomb**.

Conclusion

- 1920-1945 saw major cultural and technological transformations.
- **Hollywood, jazz, and radio** shaped mass entertainment.
- **Consumerism and advertising** grew despite economic hardship.
- **WWII accelerated technological progress**, laying foundations for the post-war world.

Key Terms

- **The Jazz Singer (1927)**: First 'talkie' film.
- **Hays Code (1930)**: Hollywood censorship guidelines.
- **BBC (1922)**: British public broadcaster.
- **Swing Music**: Popular big band jazz of the 1930s-40s.
- **The Great Gatsby (1925)**: Famous novel of the Jazz Age.
- **Assembly Line**: Henry Ford's method of mass production.
- **Radar (1935)**: Technology used in WWII air defence.
- **Manhattan Project (1942-45)**: US atomic bomb program.