Popular Culture as Historical Text:
Using Mass Media to Teach American History

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IT MIGHT SURPRISE some passing onlookers to see students in my American history class watching an early 1930s gangster film like *Scarface*, a cheesy science-fiction film like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), or listening to the rap of Public Enemy. But *Scarface* is an exemplar of the boom of gangster movies that emerged during the death spiral of the Great Depression, and it is fascinating for students to consider the resonance of this perverse inversion of the Horatio Alger story in the midst of economic calamity. While the seemingly frivolous *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is about "pods" from outer space coming to take over the human race, students can make connections to Cold War fears of infiltration, conspiracy, and conformity.[1] And a politically conscious rap group like Public Enemy provides an excellent opportunity for students to unpack the iconography of black radicalism and identify the brewing anger within the black community during the late 1980s. In other words, a history class can use popular culture texts like these to elucidate the ideological contours of American culture in various historical periods.

This is the premise of my American history class: I use popular culture sources—such as movies, music, TV, periodicals, fashion,

sports events—as vehicles for studying twentieth-century American cultural history. The class, inelegantly titled "Race, Class, and Gender in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture," is offered to juniors and seniors at University Laboratory High School, a selective admission school for academically talented students in Urbana, Illinois. The pedagogical approach taken in this class—which might be derided as merely "showing movies"—has a (perhaps justifiably) bad rap in the eyes of many history educators; if popular culture texts are handled uncritically without sufficient analytical rigor, the resulting classroom experience is intellectually feeble and pedagogically lazy. However, when approached with sufficient sophistication, popular culture texts give students the opportunity to do real intellectual heavy lifting, performing the complex work of identifying the ideological content of a mass media text and grappling with the difficult question of what popular culture tells us about the historical context in which it is produced and consumed. Based on student feedback I have received, such an approach to a history class is not only fun for students, but it is also stimulating and truly intellectually challenging.[2]

In this article, I will describe how my class works both in theory and in practice. I start by explaining the theoretical approach I employ to connect popular culture texts with the shared beliefs and social conflicts in a given time period. Then I discuss how my class works in practice, laying out the structure of my curriculum. Next, I explain some of my pedagogical strategies for leading discussions that encourage students to effectively analyze popular culture as a historical text. Finally, I identify some shortcomings as well as benefits of this approach. My goal in this article is not to encourage readers to adopt my curriculum wholesale—while I would be flattered, I doubt such an endeavor would be feasible or even desirable for most teachers. Instead, I hope that some readers will be inspired to use some of the specific sources that I discuss in this essay in their classes. More significantly, my goal is to explain my curriculum in order to encourage readers to think about how they could use popular culture as a primary source in the high school or university classroom.

Theoretical Premises

How can a historian use a popular culture text as a historical source? Certainly, one should not assume that a film acts as a

"mirror" to society; that is, a popular culture text should never be viewed as an accurate representation of how people lived in a given historical moment. This is obvious when you consider the aforementioned *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; the film is clearly not a historically reliable account of 1956's famous extraterrestrial pod invasion. However, it might be more tempting to assume that a domestic sitcom could act as a mirror to American society, but these more naturalistic texts are not simple reflections of reality either. Like all historical texts, popular culture representations of American society are "written" from a particular perspective and created for a particular purpose. Thus, the historian needs to approach such a text with familiar considerations in mind. Who are the authors? From what social location do these authors come? What historical realities are they responding to? What objectives do these authors have in creating this text? And even after carefully accounting for bias, perspective, context, and agenda, the historian will not be able to somehow reveal a pristine image of "how things really were." Instead, the historian asks: What does it tell us that American society was being depicted in this way at this historical moment, by these particular authors? Or, what does it reveal about American society that such a text was popular among a particular group of Americans? By exploring these questions, the historian can use a mass media text to learn about *culture*, a term that must be defined.

To borrow from anthropologist Clifford Geertz's formulation, culture consists of the "webs of significance" that a social group assigns to objects, behaviors, and cultural categories.[3] For example, there is nothing inherently "formal" about tying a piece of cloth around your neck. Instead, it is culture that supplies the web of significance that associates the necktie with the idea of formality (indeed, formality itself is a cultural construct). Similarly, it is culture that gives meaning to our various greeting rituals—associating a hug with intimacy, a handshake with respect and politeness, a head nod with masculine nonchalance. Furthermore, it is culture that leads us to associate masculinity and femininity with certain economic roles, modes of self-presentation (hairstyle, clothing, etc.), courtship expectations, and power dynamics. And it is culture, more than biology, that shapes our understandings of race—how we delineate racial categories and ascribe certain behaviors and capacities to different races. These cultural understandings are important because

they profoundly shape our understanding of the world around us and the way we behave within it. As such, in order for historians to understand individual and group behavior in the past, it is helpful to map the contours of the "webs of significance" that existed in a given historical context.

But how do you do that? As I joke with my students, it's not as if people in the past wrote out a document in which they stated, "Here are the shared beliefs we hold about ideal feminine behavior" and then had every American sign it. Since this mythical source does not exist, I argue that popular culture provides an especially promising means to reveal these webs of significance. Because it is produced for and consumed by a mass audience, popular culture often expresses cultural understandings that were widespread in a given time period. As such, popular films, television shows, music, fashion trends, and sports events are not merely "fun" ways to study history, but provide a particularly valuable way to discover the worldview of ordinary people, who were less likely to leave behind documents of explicit self-revelation.

Of course, there are several potential pitfalls in the endeavor of using popular culture texts to infer the contents of "mass consciousness." First, the notion of "mass consciousness" is problematic in itself— there are few, if any, beliefs that are truly universally held in a society, and any good social scientist will note that cultural understandings are defined by contestation more often than consensus. Nevertheless, there are many beliefs that are widely, if not universally, held. And more significantly, there are certain symbolic associations that are recognized by virtually all members of a society, even if they are sometimes challenged. For example, there would be near universal agreement among Americans in the 1980s that nursing was considered a "feminine" profession—that it would defy gendered expectations for a man to pursue a nursing career. Even if a few men were nurses in the 1980s, and even if some Americans challenged the legitimacy of associating of nursing with femininity, it would still be accurate to say that nursing was considered a feminine profession in 1980s American culture. Thus, by studying popular culture of a given period, we can attempt to discover these widely held "symbolic associations" without claiming to be identifying universal beliefs.

A second pitfall of this approach is the potential for historians to make overly simplistic generalizations on the basis of a given

popular culture source. I routinely remind students that we cannot make the lazy conclusion that if a popular film from 1971 expresses a view *X*, then Americans in 1971 must all have believed *X*. Nor should we presume that any source perfectly expresses some essential "zeitgeist" of an era.   Rather, we should view all popular culture texts as expressing a particular perspective on the social world of a given historical moment. Using that text's perspective, putting it in conversation with other texts from the same era, we can start to draw tentative conclusions about the historical context in which these texts were produced.[4]

Thus, despite these and other pitfalls, popular culture remains a powerful means at mapping the ideological contours of American culture in the past. For example, by analyzing the landmark film *Birth of a Nation* and the career of black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, students can study the ideological justifications given for white racial supremacy and explore why interracial sexual relationships were deemed so threatening in 1910s America. By analyzing episodes of 1950s sitcoms like *I Love Lucy*, *The Honeymooners*, and *Father Knows Best*, students can study notions and prescriptions of proper gender behavior in the era. By analyzing a TV show like *All in the Family* and popular films like *Rocky* and *Saturday Night Fever*, the historian can study the social and economic frustrations of white working-class men in the 1970s and identify trends in the political culture that helped precipitate the Reagan Revolution.

Thus, my class uses popular culture texts as "cultural receptacles" that can be unpacked in order to shed light on the social world in which they were produced.[5] I take an approach similar to that of historian Steven Biel, who argued that the sinking of the *Titanic* was not a "transformative event" that reshaped American society, but a kind of "social drama" in which "American culture thought out loud about itself. Americans understood the disaster according to concerns they already felt, hopes they already harbored, beliefs and ideas they already held and were struggling to preserve."[6] Similarly, in my class, I rarely argue that the texts we study were somehow "transformative" in that they succeeded in reshaping American culture; instead, we can use popular culture texts as a light bulb that illuminates its historical context. If we can study films, television, and music as sources in which American culture "thought out loud

about itself," the webs of significance that define American culture in a given time period come into focus.

The Micro-Structure: A Unit in my Class

With the abstract theorization behind me, let me try to explain what this means in practice. My year-long class is divided into ten units, each tackling a certain set of questions about a certain historical era using a certain set of historical sources (a list of units can be found later in the essay). Each unit follows a typical structure: 1) Historical Background, 2) Textual Analysis, 3) Synthesis Discussion, and 4) Written Analysis.

Historical Background: The first few days of a unit are devoted to providing students with the historical context they will ultimately need for their discussion of the popular culture sources. For example, in the "Gender Ideology and the 1950s Domestic Sitcom" unit (hereafter known as the "1950s gender unit"), there were various themes I laid out for students at the beginning of the unit. Most of these are standard fare for treatment of the 1950s in a U.S. history survey: economic prosperity (and its limitations), consumer culture, suburbanization (and its relationship to residential segregation outside the South), and manifestations of consensus and conformity (as well as critiques of those trends). Additionally, given the subject matter of this particular unit, I need to describe the early history of television and, most importantly, explore a traditional interpretation of gender roles in the period: after the fleeting revolution of women entering the workplace during World War II, the 1950s featured a return of women to the home and a "reversion" to a restrictive, subservient, and domesticated ideal of femininity.[7] Not surprisingly, I discuss and have students read excerpts from *The Feminine Mystique*. Thus, in the opening days of a unit, I have laid out the threads that I will want to students to weave together as they dive into the mass media primary sources.

Textual Analysis: The bulk of the unit is devoted to viewing the popular culture texts and discussing them. For example, in the aforementioned 1950s gender unit, we watch and discuss episodes of *The Honeymooners*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Father Knows Best.* In other units, I might play music for the students, give them newspaper coverage of sports events, show examples of fashion trends, or most

commonly, show abridged versions of films.[8] Before showing a given source, I usually provide some helpful background (e.g., the Nielsen ratings for the show, the political beliefs of a film's director, etc.) and then provide students with a graphic organizer to help with note taking.[9] After watching the source, we would spend thirty to forty minutes discussing it—sometimes in small groups with questions, other times in instructor-led large-group discussion (a discussion of pedagogical strategies can be found later in the article).

In the case of the 1950s gender unit, these discussions often revolved around the narrative structure of each episode. As students discover, all three shows feature female characters expressing frustration with the limitations placed on them *as women*, and to varying degrees, the women deliberately transgress those boundaries in the episode. However, the episodes all culminate with the female character accepting her traditional role, though sometimes the male characters have learned that they should show more appreciation for the importance and difficulty of female work.[10] Finally, students discuss the ideological implications of the character depictions and narrative structure of the shows, starting to decipher what these shows reveal about the historical context in which they were produced.

Synthesis Discussion: At the end of each unit, I spend a day or more leading a discussion that seeks to synthesize what we learned from the popular culture sources and make connections to the historical context. While students make connections between sources throughout the Textual Analysis section of the unit, the Synthesis Discussion is explicitly devoted to cross-textual comparison. This usually involves comparing and contrasting the ideological implications of the popular culture sources in a given unit. Additionally, it means trying to connect the sources with the historical themes I discussed in the Historical Background section of the unit; in this way, I hope to map the "webs of significance" I discussed earlier in the article.

In the case of the 1950s gender unit, this Synthesis Discussion varies each school year, but some familiar themes tend to emerge. Students tend to discuss: 1) what behaviors, mannerisms, clothing, and economic roles are associated with femininity and masculinity in the shows; 2) whether the shows support Betty Friedan's argument that a "Feminine Mystique" idealizing domesticated femininity

prevailed in American culture; 3) the degree to which the shows actually depict female characters challenging the gender expectations placed on them; 4) whether the popularity of such shows indicates that the TV audience adhered to the gender ideologies being expressed in the shows; and 5) the differences (and to a lesser extent, the similarities) between depiction of female characters in modern film/television and the shows we watched in class.

Written Analysis: Finally, each unit ends with a culminating assignment—usually, but not exclusively, a three- to four-page essay in response to a teacher-supplied prompt. These essays require students to provide sophisticated analysis of the popular culture sources in a given unit and link evidence from the texts with the historical context we discussed in the Historical Background portion of the unit. The result should be a complex historical argument that uses evidence from popular culture to map the ideological terrain in American culture in a given historical period. As I tell my students, the prompts I give them for these essays are usually infuriatingly vague, because I want to see them carve out an argument from a thicket of evidence. The strongest papers are those that are able to successfully execute two tasks: 1) effectively marshal textual evidence (e.g., quotations, evocative character descriptions, efficient yet illustrative plot descriptions) to support their claims; and 2) synthesize the popular culture sources with the historical context in order to create a coherent argument.

In the most recent iteration of the 1950s gender unit, I asked students to respond to a quote from fictional professor Lamont Cranston, who writes that "1950s domestic sitcoms—such as *The Honeymooners*, *I Love Lucy*, and *Father Knows Best*—reveal widespread approval of traditional gender roles in American society during that decade." An excellent response to such a prompt must do two things: first, it should assess Cranston's (somewhat simplistic) assertion that the popularity of a television show can reveal the audience's "widespread approval" of its ideological perspective; second, it must demonstrate how Cranston's claim is insufficiently nuanced by supplying a more subtle analysis of the gender ideology of the three shows. As such, these papers provide students a chance to do the difficult work of the cultural historian: providing a complex reading of textual evidence and drawing compelling conclusions about the historical period being studied.

The Macro-Structure: Unit Summary and Research Project

Having discussed the structure of a typical unit in my class, I now wish to elucidate the structure of the course as a whole. This is a two-semester class, during which students explore five units in each semester related to different themes in specific periods in twentieth-century U.S. history. The following paragraph includes a very brief summary of my curriculum, while a lengthier summary of the historical themes explored and sources used in these ten units is featured in the **Appendix**. Hopefully, this chart helps to explain the structure of my class and gives readers some ideas of how they could use popular culture sources to study different periods in twentieth-century American history.

In Unit 1, students study *The Birth of a Nation* and the career of Jack Johnson to elucidate the ideology of white supremacy in early twentieth-century United States. Unit 2 situates public discourse surrounding changes in women's behavior in the context of the broader culture wars of the 1920s. In Unit 3, students compare the depiction of American society in four Depression-era films featuring protagonists who struggle to succeed in the face of powerful social forces. In Unit 4, students track the contours of the "us vs. them" dichotomy presented in formal and informal World War II propaganda and explore how Americans defined their own national virtues and the villainy of their enemies. Unit 5 looks to film and television sources to study cultural responses to the threat of Communism and critiques of McCarthyite responses to that threat. Unit 6 is the aforementioned unit concerning domestic sitcoms and gender ideology during the 1950s. Unit 7 situates the explosion of rock and roll in the mid-1950s in the context of broader discussions of race, integration, and juvenile delinquency. In Unit 8, students explore different manifestations of the counterculture by studying various musicians, athletes, magazines, and fashion trends. Unit 9 focuses on the depiction of working-class men in 1970s film and television in order to understand the historical conditions that contributed to the ascendancy of the Reagan Revolution. Finally, in Unit 10, students analyze the social commentary of black artists such as Public Enemy, Spike Lee, and N.W.A.

However, the chart below leaves out a crucial aspect of my course: the final assignment in each semester is a research paper on a topic

of each student's choice. Their broad mandate is to investigate a set of popular culture sources and craft an argument about what these sources reveal about an issue (or issues) of historical significance. In other words, they are picking their own popular culture texts and doing the same kind of cultural history that the class explores in each unit. As I tell students, this essay is not about popular culture per se, but, rather, about what popular culture can reveal about *something bigger* in American society. Because this is a very time-consuming and intellectually challenging process, I try to provide a lot of support: I meet one-on-one with each student several times during the semester; I provide detailed feedback on a "prospectus"; I give students between ten to twelve class days each semester of work time devoted to researching and writing the paper; and I have started to require (rather than merely encourage) a completed draft so that I can provide substantial feedback prior to final submission.

I have been extraordinarily pleased with the intelligence and creativity that I've seen in these research projects. I've read student work about how the rivalry between Professor Xavier and Magneto in the *X-Men* came to function as allegory for the famous dichotomy between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Another student provided a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the Disney princess and its relationship to changes in mass consumer tastes regarding the depiction of female characters. And the list goes on: *The Godfather* and white ethnicity; *Rebel Without a Cause* and the discourse of juvenile delinquency; the early 1990s University of Michigan basketball team (the "Fab Five") and understandings of blackness in American culture; the significance of differences between war movies about World War II vs. Vietnam. While the process of researching and writing is quite challenging, students ultimately value the opportunity to pursue a popular culture theme that they find truly interesting and to build their own argument about its cultural significance.

Pedagogical Strategy:
Using Discussion to Encourage Historical Thinking

In addition to describing the structure of my curriculum in this article, I wanted to provide some concrete pedagogical strategies for using popular culture in the American history classroom. While

I don't have the space to discuss the pedagogical underpinnings of every aspect in my class, I did want to spend some time explaining how I use class discussion to spur the kind of historical thinking that students should hone. Ultimately, I want students to learn 1) how to analyze popular culture as a historical text, and 2) how to use evidence from popular culture with other more traditional forms of evidence to draw conclusions about a historical period. To achieve those goals, the teacher needs to drive discussions in a way that forces students to employ those historical skills. The following table describes my approach to class discussion in the different phases of my units:

Textual Analysis: While Studying a Text[11]	
Given the premise of the class, the analysis of popular culture texts is an essential skill to teach and cultivate. However, this is challenging, because most students are not used to analyzing these types of sources for their historical significance. As such, it is important to help students hone this skill by:	
Providing background	Before a film, I provide students with background information specific to a given text that will be helpful for understanding and interpreting it. I might briefly discuss some of the biographical background of a director or screenwriter. Or I might provide some helpful popular culture context. For example, I situate *Scarface* as one of dozens of gangster movies to hit theaters in the early 1930s. However, I sometimes strategically withhold certain information if it will benefit discussion. For example, when showing *All in the Family*, I don't reveal the political views of creator Norman Lear until students have had a chance to infer those views by analyzing the show.
Preparing students to look for certain things when they study a text	I give cues before some scenes to help focus students' attention on relevant aspects of the texts they are studying. For example: • "As you watch, consider what image of the antebellum South is being presented in this scene." • "I want you to pay attention to how the black characters are depicted in this scene."

	• "As you listen to this song, consider how the performing style differs from the original version of the song it is covering." • "Think about this scene through the lens of class. What are we told about the class background and class aspirations of the two characters?"
Providing graphic organizers	The graphic organizers are usually simple, primarily consisting of "boxes" for key characters and themes. I encourage students to write down snippets of dialogue, mannerisms, and plot points to help define those characters and themes. This note taking is beneficial for many reasons, but most importantly, it helps create richer discussion of the sources because students can easily refer to their notes for specific textual evidence.
Having students describe images	For still images (political cartoons, advertisements, photographs, and still frames), I typically focus student attention on the importance of visual composition by asking a student to "describe the image as if you were explaining it to someone over the phone." This forces students to carefully articulate the different components of the image. Then we can analyze the messages being conveyed by that image.
Stopping frequently to discuss key points	I never simply spend an entire class period watching a film. Instead, I periodically stop for discussion. Frequently, I'll ask questions like "What have learned about [Character X] so far?" in order to set up key points I'll want to revisit, or to set up a contrast with how the character will ultimately change in the course of the film. Additionally, there are some particularly rich scenes that have enough going on that I want to make to make sure students are "catching everything" that will ultimately pay off in later discussions.

Textual Analysis: After Viewing a Text	
After watching a given film, show, or group of songs, I typically have a thirty- to forty-five-minute discussion attempting to draw out key points and help students make connections to the historical context. Here are some pedagogical strategies I've used in these discussions:	
Start with small group discussions	Frequently, I split students into groups of three to four for some preliminary discussion. Sometimes I ask students to discuss the depiction of particular characters; sometimes I ask a more focused question like "where did the humor come from in this episode?" I find these opening conversations helpful because they give all students the opportunity to articulate their own thoughts. They also provide students a way to start processing their ideas, making them better prepared to express their own interpretations in the more "high-pressure" environment of the large group discussion.
Map the characters	I often start the group discussions by having students describe the key characters in the source by providing adjectives, dialogue, plot points, etc. I jot their insights on the board, providing us something to return to as we continue the discussion.
Move from description to interpretation	After laying out the "foundation" in earlier discussions, we move towards interpretation of historical significance. I ask students to: • **Make generalizations across the entire text**: "How are black characters generally depicted?"; "How do the male characters treat female characters?" • **Determine author's intent**: "Why do you think Stallone chose to have Rocky lose the final fight with Creed?"; "Do you think the filmmaker wants us to sympathize with Tony?" • **Analyze "message"**: "What is the critique of Communism that is delivered in the film?"; "What message does this film ultimately send about the fairness of American society?"

	• **Relate to historical context**: "What are some of the political tensions of the time that the character of Archie Bunker helps us understand?"; "What does this episode of *Father Knows Best* tell us about what behaviors were considered masculine and what were considered feminine?" • **Weigh the validity of an argument**: "Does this episode support the argument that 1950s sitcoms reinforced traditional gender roles?"; "Do you agree with Cowie that *Rocky* 'combines white blue-collar renewal with what borders on revenge against the success and power of black people'?"
Determine what a source "does"	I encourage students to consider not just what a source "says," but also what a source "does"—the ideological work performed by a given text. Needless to say, this task is difficult for students at first and requires some explanation. The key thing to help students realize is that by presenting a certain story with certain characters conveying certain messages, the author is often (consciously or unconsciously) supporting an agenda or furthering a cause. For example, the filmmakers responsible for *Birth of a Nation* are not merely depicting Reconstruction in a certain way; they are providing a portrait of the evils of Reconstruction that serve to *justify white supremacy and the legitimacy of Jim Crow*.
Force students to cite evidence	With all of the above questions, I will push students to cite specific evidence. I don't want to settle for something like, "Rocky is depicted as a nice guy despite his tough environment." Instead, I want to push for examples: Rocky refuses to break the thumbs of the guy who owes money; he carries the drunk homeless man into the bar to get warm; he is fond of animals; he has a crush on sweet, innocent Adrian instead of a more worldly character. By doing this, students are learning to support arguments with textual evidence, a skill that will be useful on their papers.

Synthesis Discussion	
After viewing all the sources in a unit, I try to really push students to do some of the intellectual work I discussed earlier in this article. I want students to 1) put sources "in conversation with each other," and 2) use the sources to "illuminate" their historical context. Here are some of the strategies I deploy:	
Cross-textual comparison	I start by having students compare and contrast the sources from the unit. Here are some examples: • "What are some similarities and differences between the protagonists in the movies from this unit?" • "How can you compare and contrast what each source is saying about the Communist threat?" • "What are some commonalities between these different manifestations of the counterculture?"
Connecting to historical context	I then have students engage in the difficult work of determining what these sources tell us about their historical context. These are obviously very deep questions, and I therefore sometimes give students the chance to write out their thoughts before having a group discussion. Here are some examples of questions: • "Why do you think the behavior of the 'flapper' provoked such a strong response in 1920s society? What does that tell us about the gender expectations of the era?" • "What conclusions can we draw about the way Americans thought about the 'enemy' during World War II? How does this relate to how Americans viewed themselves?" • "Collectively, do these sitcoms support the argument that mass media in the 1950s perpetuated the feminine mystique that Friedan identified?" • "Taken together, what does the popularity of *Birth of a Nation* and the cultural response to Jack Johnson tell us about the way gender and racial ideology interacted in this period?"

Modern comparisons and self-reflection questions	At the end of units, I often have students make comparisons between the time period we are studying and our own society. For example: • "How do we—as twenty-first-century students in a history class—look at this text differently from its original audience?" • "How is the debate about Communist infiltration similar to modern debates about Islam and terrorism?" • "Are women still depicted this way on television? Why or why not?"

Shortcoming and Benefits of this Pedagogical Approach

Undoubtedly, there are shortcomings to such an approach to an American history class. First, a look through my curriculum reveals various problems of coverage: sexuality remains underexplored; the black-white dichotomy prevails at the expense of discussion of other racial groups; there is too much on the 1950s and too little on the last two decades of the century. Second, the level of depth required by such an approach is a logistical impossibility for many classes. Even if an AP History teacher would love to spend three weeks of class time on cultural responses to the Communist threat, they could never afford to. And semester-length college classes don't have as much class time and would therefore have to assign most popular culture texts as homework—this creates problems of workload and accountability. Third, the level of abstraction can be a challenge for some students, especially when they are forced to articulate such analytically complex ideas "on the spot" in class discussions.

Despite these and other potential drawbacks, I remain a strong advocate for using popular culture as primary sources in history classes. Based on my self-reflection and the feedback given by students on anonymous surveys, I will point to three major benefits.

First, the class helps students become sophisticated analysts of today's popular culture. I jokingly tell students that I am going to "ruin pop culture" for them, as it will henceforth be hard to avoid intellectualizing the stuff they are just trying to passively consume. It brought a smile to my face when I read the words of one student in an anonymous survey: "I truly will never look at pop culture in

the same way again." By viewing popular culture in relation to its historical context, students are developing analytical skills that allow them to make connections between the media they consume and their own social world. In the words of another student, "I'm now always looking for trends I see in society and culture today and subconsciously (or consciously) analyzing them and thinking about how it relates to other things, how it relates to me, and depending on what it is, how I can personally react to it and impact it based on who I am."

Second, the premise of the class—analyzing the cultural implications of popular culture texts—lends itself very well to student participation. One of the most common themes in student feedback is that they appreciate the opportunity to participate regularly in class discussions; in one student's words, "I like that we go beyond a typical history class and try to analyze things ourselves." The popular culture texts provide something that students can "chew on," and therefore, discussions are neither regurgitation of the contents of a reading or idle speculation that isn't supported by evidence. Instead, students can spend significant class time analyzing the texts and making connections to historical context.

Third, and I believe most importantly, this pedagogical approach encourages sophisticated analytical thinking and a complex approach to history. In the words of one student, "It's one thing to be told the facts and made to memorize them, but getting the chance to analyze history on our own and draw our own conclusions has been very valuable." Another particularly heartwarming comment provided an almost giddy description of the task of making connections between popular culture and its historical context: "The ways we analyzed the sources were SO fascinating; we pulled so many different threads through the sources and somehow there was all this overlap, and the broader historical context made the source make so much more sense, ahhh." Another student's survey feedback demonstrates how this class helps cultivate a complex approach to the interpretation of evidence: "[W]e learn…as much [about] the study of history and the effect of perception on the historical record as we do about the actual events…I enjoy how we approach history in a very nuanced way, understanding it as something very subjective and colored by perception."

As the previous paragraph illustrates, the use of popular culture texts as primary sources has the potential to make students excited

about the most cerebral and analytical aspects of the historical enterprise. As such, there is much to be recommended in an approach to popular culture that encourages student to craft complex interpretations of texts, allows for rich student participation and class discussion, and facilitates the difficult task of connecting mass media to its historical context.

Appendix: Unit Descriptions[12]

Unit Title	Popular Culture Texts
Unit 1: Racial Ideology and Miscegenation, 1900-1920[13]	• *Birth of a Nation* (1915) • Various sources documenting the career of boxer Jack Johnson: fight footage, newspaper coverage, cartoons, photographs, Johnson's own words, as well as secondary source analysis.
Historical Background: This unit starts by studying the ideology that justified white supremacy over various non-white peoples from 1865-1920: Reconstruction and its evolving historiography; the institutionalization of Jim Crow and the rise of racialized lynching; cultural responses to the rise of "new" immigration; and the ideology of American imperialism in the Philippines.	
Popular Culture Analysis: Both "texts" for this unit allow students to map the contours of racial ideology that sought to justify white supremacy as natural and beneficial to all Americans. By closely analyzing *Birth of a Nation*, students see how the film's distorted depiction of Reconstruction serves to justify a social order built on white supremacy. Then, students study the dramatic social response to black boxer Jack Johnson's success inside the ring (his victory over white rival Jim Jefferies in 1910 sparked race riots across the country) and his sexual relations with white women outside the ring (which ultimately led to his federal prosecution under the Mann Act). Together, *Birth* and the career of Jack Johnson both illustrate the importance of gender to understanding the racial discourse of the period; the perceived sexual threat of black men to white women crucially shapes the racial ideology of the period.	

Unit 2: Gender and the Culture Wars of the 1920s[14]	• Articles, photographs, cartoons, etc., describing changes in women's fashion, hairstyle, dating practices, dance hall behavior, as well as advertisements depicting and targeting women.

Historical Background: This unit is built on the (admittedly somewhat reductive) premise that American culture in the 1920s can be productively understood by studying the tensions between "modern" changes/challenges and corresponding assertions of "traditional" values. At the beginning of the unit, I set up this framework by briefly discussing the Lost Generation, the Harlem Renaissance, pop Freudianism, and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, as well as debates over evolution, immigration, mass production and consumption, and prohibition.

Popular Culture Analysis: The paradigm of challenge and traditionalist response is useful when discussing the debates over women's political, economic, and social behavior during the decade. By studying (and complicating) the so-called "new woman" and the cultural type of the "flapper," analyzing changes in women's hairstyle and fashion, exploring changes in courtship practices, and looking at the depiction of women in a selection of advertisements, students learn how debates about women's behavior were linked to the broader "culture wars" of the 1920s.

Unit 3: The American Dream and the Potency of the Individual in 1930s America[15]	• *Scarface* (1932) • *I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) • *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) • *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

Historical Background: This unit starts by describing the causes and political/cultural responses to the Great Depression in the Hoover era. After showing the first two films, I pick up the historical narrative in 1933, providing a historical treatment of the New Deal: an overview of the first and second New Deal; assessing its effectiveness at bringing economic recovery and redistributing wealth; addressing the ways in which some groups (especially African Americans) were left out of certain New Deal programs; and, ultimately, addressing the legacy of New Deal in reshaping the federal government's role in American life.

Popular Culture Analysis: This unit is built around the framework of the American Dream: is it possible for all Americans, regardless of

background, to succeed through hard work and moral behavior? All four films in this unit focus on (white male) protagonists who struggle to succeed in the face of powerful social forces: the gangsters in films like *Scarface* are able to rise up in the world before their ultimate demise, but only by breaking the law and stepping on anyone who gets in their way; the protagonist in *Fugitive* finds himself reduced to criminality despite being virtuous, intelligent, and hard-working; in *Grapes*, the protagonist and his family nobly persevere, but find themselves at the whim of exploitative businesses and corrupt local officials; in *Mr. Smith*, the everyman hero strives to rescue true American virtue from the clutches of a powerful monopolist and the political stooges that are in his pocket. Thus, this unit allows students to look at cultural responses to the Great Depression as well as engage with a question that continues to shape political discourse in this country: is the fate of the individual in American society the result of personal or social responsibility? And as a corollary, what role should the government play in American economic life?

Unit 4: Why We Fight— Popular Culture and Propaganda during World War II[16]	• Pre-war interventionist and isolationist political cartoons • *Why We Fight: Prelude to War* (1942) • *Casablanca* (1942) • World War II propaganda posters

Historical Background: In addition to providing a chronological account of World War II, I compare two different historical approaches to understanding World War II in American life. First, I describe the "Good War" narrative, which argues that the American cause was necessary and just, describes the home front as typified by consensus and shared sacrifice, and places World War II at the origins of virtuous social movements for racial and gender equality. Then, I provide a revisionist account that challenges the so-called "Good War myth," before ultimately trying to reconcile the two perspectives.

Popular Culture Analysis: This unit focuses on how different forms of propaganda solicited approval for entering World War II as well as enthusiasm for making the sacrifices necessary to win the war. Students start by unpacking the ideology of "traditional" propaganda, the documentary film *Why We Fight* that was produced by Frank Capra for the U.S. Army. Then students explore the propagandistic implications of *Casablanca*, an entertainment film that nevertheless provides an allegorical case for interventionism as a form of morally virtuous

sacrifice. The unit finishes by contrasting the depiction of the Japanese and Germans in American propaganda; the generalization emerges that while the evil of the Germans was deemed a product of a warped ideology propagated by elites, the evil of the Japanese was portrayed as a product of their racial character. Throughout the unit, students track the contours of the "us vs. them" dichotomy created in these sources: in times of war, how do we define our own national virtues and how do we define the villainy of our enemies?

Unit 5: Anti-Communism and Cold War Culture[17]	• *On the Waterfront* (1954) • *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) • *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962, based on 1954 book) • *The Twilight Zone*: "Eye of the Beholder" (1960) and "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" (1960)

Historical Background: I start with a lesson focused on foreign policy and the origins of the Cold War. Then I teach a lesson entitled "McCarthyism without McCarthy," arguing that domestic anti-Communism in the postwar decade went far deeper than one man: the effort to sniff out Communist subversion through constitutionally suspect means was widespread, involved both major political parties, and preceded McCarthy's arrival on the national stage by several years.

Popular Culture Analysis: This unit looks to popular culture to study cultural responses to the threat of Communism and critiques of McCarthyite responses to that threat. Students study *On the Waterfront* as a parable about Director Elia Kazan's decision to testify before HUAC; analyze *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in order to shed light on fears of infiltration, conspiracy, and conformity; explore how *The Manchurian Candidate* simultaneously depicts a malevolent Communist conspiracy while criticizing McCarthyite hysteria; and, finally, unpack the liberal anti-Communism of *The Twilight Zone*, which both explored the threat of Communist totalitarianism and critiqued hysterical responses to that threat.

Unit 6: Gender Ideology and the 1950s Domestic Sitcom[18]	• *I Love Lucy*: "Job Switching" (1952) • *The Honeymooners*: excerpts from three 1955 episodes • *Father Knows Best*: "Betty, Girl Engineer" (1956)

Historical Background: This unit starts by discussing common subjects in a lesson on the 1950s in a U.S. History survey: economic prosperity (and its limitations), consumer culture, suburbanization (and its relationship to residential segregation outside the South), and manifestations of consensus and conformity (as well as critiques of those trends). Additionally, given the subject matter of this particular unit, I needed to describe the early history of television and, most importantly, explore gender ideology in the 1950s.

Popular Culture Analysis: The traditional narrative holds that in the 1950s, American culture featured a retrenchment of so-called traditional gender roles: the cultural idealization of the breadwinning husband as head of household and a submissive homemaker wife. To add nuance to this valuable but somewhat simplistic view, students study the gender ideology presented in three popular sitcoms of the decade. A common theme emerges in all three shows we watch: the women express frustrations with the limitations placed on them by restrictive gender expectations, but ultimately the narrative resolution of each episode shows the women accepting those traditional roles.

Unit 7: Rock and Roll, Racial Integration, and Juvenile Delinquency[19]	• Examples of early 1950s rhythm and blues and mainstream pop • Examples of white covers of black R&B originals • Examples of rock and roll stars (Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley)

Historical Background: Because the previous unit discussed much of the 1950s historical context, this unit just starts with a brief lesson describing the state of the music industry in the early 1950s, residential segregation in the North, and the origins of the Civil Rights Movement.

Popular Culture Analysis: In the early 1950s, musical taste was effectively divided along racial lines, with black consumers listening to "rhythm and blues" and white consumers listening to white pop. Starting

in 1954, white covers of black originals started to climb the pop charts. Soon after, black artists like Chuck Berry and Little Richard grew in popularity, and white artists like Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley exploded onto the charts while incorporating musical and performative styles that had been associated with black musicians. This unit borrows heavily from the analysis of scholar Brian Ward, situating the cultural responses to the emergence of rock and roll in the context of the emerging Civil Rights Movement and fears surrounding juvenile delinquency.

Unit 8: The Counterculture and the Legacy of the "Sixties" in American Political Culture[20]	• Music: The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Woodstock Festival, etc. • Trends in counterculture fashion • *Ms. Magazine* • Depictions of homosexuality in popular culture (articles in popular periodicals, clips from films like *Boys in the Band*) • The career of Muhammad Ali (interviews with Ali from the 1960s provide excellent primary source material)

Historical Background: This unit starts by discussing the history of American involvement in Vietnam and the peace movement. Then I provide a broad framework for understanding the counterculture in its historical context.

Popular Culture Analysis: This unit attempts to historically situate and map the ideological contours of the so-called counterculture. After the historical background section, I have student groups teach classes on various topics: exploring the (counter)cultural content of artists like the Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, etc.; unpacking the social and political statements of counterculture fashion and self-presentation; analyzing *Ms. Magazine* as a means of exploring second-wave feminism; using the career of Muhammad Ali to study black radicalism and the antiwar movement; and analyzing depictions of homosexuality in popular culture to better understand the background for gay liberation. The unit ends by exploring the political legacy of these trends, exploring the rise of what is derisively called "identity politics."

Unit 9: The White Working Class in the 1970s and the Seeds of the Reagan Revolution[21]	• *All in the Family*: "Meet the Bunkers" and "Lionel Moves Into the Neighborhood" (1971) • *Rocky* (1976) • *Saturday Night Fever* (1977)

Historical Background: There are two major historical background "modules" in this unit. First, I lay out a series of challenges to sixties liberalism by exploring opposition to 1) black activism and race-conscious legislation, 2) feminism and changes in sexual behavior, and 3) the activist welfare state. After discussing *All in the Family*, I return to the historical narrative by discussion 1970s stagflation and deindustrialization.

Popular Culture Analysis: This unit focuses on depictions of the white working class during the 1970s. Episodes of *All in the Family* explicitly explore political culture by providing a liberal criticism of the reactionary conservative politics of the so-called silent majority. Both *Rocky* and *Saturday Night Fever* depict the striving of white working-class male protagonists amidst stagflation, deindustrialization, and urban decay. Ultimately, these sources help illustrate some of the trends that help explain a rightward shift within the white working class that contributed to the ascendancy of the Reagan Revolution.

Unit 10: Fighting the Power: Black Popular Culture in the late 1980s[22]	• *Style Wars* (1983) • Music: Public Enemy, N.W.A, Ice Cube, from 1988-1991 • *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

Historical Background: This unit puts trends in black popular culture in the context of various social/political developments: deindustrialization, urban decay, and concentrated racialized poverty; the War on Drugs, the rise in incarceration, and the tensions between police and black communities; and debates within black communities about what constitutes effective and authentic forms of self-presentation.

Popular Culture Analysis: In the realm of popular culture, the unit starts by providing a historical explanation of the emergence of hip hop culture (consisting of breakdancing, graffiti, DJing, and rap) in the South Bronx. Then students analyze the political statements made by socially conscious culture makers Public Enemy and Spike Lee. Next, students study the emergence of so-called gangsta rap by listening to N.W.A and Ice Cube. The unit culminates with discussion of the L.A. Riots and a reflection on the rise of mass incarceration.

Notes

1.   This analysis borrows heavily from Stuart Samuels, "The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)," in *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Ungar, 1979), 203-217.

2.   In an article like this, it is necessary (though extremely difficult) to stay focused on pedagogy and resist the urge to delve too deeply into particular content. As such, I have tried to explain *what* I teach only so much as to adequately elucidate *how* I teach. However, if you are interested in discussing any of the sources or historical arguments or pedagogical approaches discussed in this article, I would happily correspond by e-mail at <leff@illinois.edu>.

3.   Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

4.   For a sophisticated analysis of how to relate popular culture to its historical context, see Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). I employ his model, which locates popular culture products at the intersection of factors that "can be crudely divided into forces of production and consumption." While the "diverse agendas" of various producers (songwriters, musicians, industry executives, producers, etc.) shape the content of popular culture, ordinary people also shape it by encouraging producers to cater to certain consumer tastes, as expressed through purchasing decisions (p. 5).

5.   Importantly, I only use popular culture texts to study the *time in which they were produced*. Thus, I wouldn't show a film *about* the desired historical period but produced in a later period (e.g., I would not show the 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*, in a unit about World War II). As such, when I use *Birth of a Nation*, the chronological period of analysis is not truly Reconstruction, but rather the 1910s—or more precisely, how people remembered Reconstruction during the 1910s.

6.   Steven Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 8.

7.   James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle, "From Rosie to Lucy: The Mass Media and Images of Women in the 1950s," in *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, second ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 364-394.

8.   The abridgement of films is a necessary evil. Since I want students to put sources in conversation with each other, I want to show multiple films in a given unit. However, it is not feasible to show multiple films in their entirety given the limited class time available. While I theoretically could have assigned films as homework, I rarely do so because I am reluctant to burden students with excessive out-of-class responsibilities. Thus, I carefully create abridged versions of the films that cut scenes less relevant to the themes of the unit while trying to preserve their narrative coherence.

9.   These graphic organizers usually guide students to take notes on the depiction of key characters in the source. I strongly encourage student to write down illustrative snippets of dialogue that will be useful to reference in class discussions.

10.   For example, in the famous "Job Switching" episode of *I Love Lucy*, the title character and her husband Ricky swap roles for an episode. Tired of being ribbed by Ricky for "lying around the house all day long," Lucy insists that she could easily work for a living while Ricky confidently and dismissively asserts that there is nothing difficult about being a homemaker. They plan to switch roles for a week, but it only takes a day for both characters to fail miserably (and farcically) outside their traditional gender role. Thus, the episode concludes with Lucy and Ricky agreeing to "go back to the way things were." The other episodes in this unit similarly feature characters challenging or subverting gender expectations, only to ultimately return to normalcy by the episode's conclusion. *I Love Lucy*, "Job Switching," CBS, first broadcast September 15, 1952, directed by William Asher, written by Jess Oppenheimer, Madelyn Pugh, and Bob Carroll, Jr.

11.   The following table assumes that the "text" being studied is a film or a TV show—the sources I most commonly use. The structure for discussing music, fashion, and sports texts would be organized slightly differently, though I would pursue many of the same lines of inquiry.

12.   In addition to the units listed below, I also spend one to two days each on specific topics that are not part of a larger unit. These "modules" explore: historical changes in the depiction of LGBT characters in mass media; the depiction of (South and East) Asian characters in mass media; how the evolution of the Disney princess relates to changes in mass consumer tastes regarding the depiction of female characters. These mini-units provide me with time to read and provide feedback on student drafts for their research paper, while also allowing me to discuss some important themes that didn't fit nicely into one of the larger units. Additionally, I spend one week between Units 7 and 8 teaching a meta-unit called "The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory." At one level, the goal of the unit is to demythologize the Civil Rights Movement, providing correctives by putting the North back into the historical narrative, addressing misconceptions about Rosa Parks, and complicating portraits of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. But at a deeper level, the unit is about myth and narrative, asking questions like: how do we depict the Civil Rights Movement in American civic culture and school curricula? What stories do we tell and how do we tell them? What ideological work is done by focusing on the South, lionizing Rosa Parks as a quiet, tired seamstress, or creating the Martin/Malcolm dichotomy? The unit is a good opportunity to teach

students that history does not merely consist of recovering the past, but shaping it according the interests and objectives of storytellers in the present. See Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013).

13.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Leon Litwack, "The Birth of a Nation," in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 136-141; Ken Burns, dir., *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, screenplay by Geoffrey Ward, DVD (Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2005).

14.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Mary Murphy, "'…And All That Jazz': Changing Manners and Morals in Butte After World War I," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46, no. 4 (December 1996): 50-63.

15.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984).

16.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: John W. Dower, "Race, Language, and War in Two Cultures: World War II in Asia," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 169-201; Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*, fourth ed. (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

17.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*, fourth ed. (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Stuart Samuels, "The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)," in *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Ungar, 1979), 203-217; Elia Kazan, "A Statement from Elia Kazan," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1952, p. 7.

18.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle, "From Rosie to Lucy: The Mass Media and Images of Women in the 1950s," in *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, second ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 364-394.

19.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

20.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
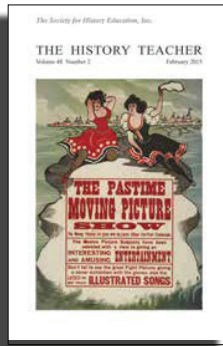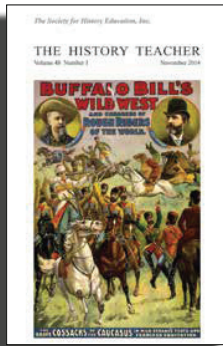
21.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New York Press, 2010).

22.   Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about this unit: Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).