

A Counter-Curriculum for the Pop Culture Classroom

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Popular culture courses first appeared in the college and university curriculum in social science and humanities departments in the late 1950s in response to the Frankfurt School critique of the postwar bourgeois order. The Frankfurt School critics, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Hannah Arendt, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno, were in turn responding to Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin. As a discipline, “popular culture studies” (shortened in recent years to “culture studies”) began as a disestablishmentarian enterprise pursued by activist intellectuals of left-liberal disposition. The names of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams are important as successors to the Frankfurt School figures and as contemporary cue-givers of the discipline. The scholar-radicals typically construed nineteenth-century civic custom—and even more so, twentieth-century bourgeois culture—as ideology, using the term in its Marxist sense as the expression of a false and freedom-limiting consciousness that impedes progress. In English departments and other departments where the study of literature was in order, interest in genre fiction was a going concern, with dedicated courses by the mid-1970s at the latest.

So it was that, when I resumed matriculation toward my baccalaureate in the summer of 1983 at UCLA, I enrolled in an English department offering taught by the then young Raymond Paredes (now a dean) dedicated to the American Popular Novel Since World War Two, or some similar rubric. Among the heterogeneous set of texts that Paredes assigned were *Death in the Fifth Position*, an early 1950s hard-boiled detective story parody by Gore

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Vidal using the pen name of Edgar Box; *Fear of Flying* (1973), by Erica Jong; a “Travis McGee” novel by John D. MacDonald; and the noteworthy western *Shane* (1949), by Jack Schaefer.

Paredes was not a radical. He was merely a standard-issue academic liberal whose remarks on the readings can be guessed by anyone familiar with an English department: Vidal the parodist worked on a higher level than Schaefer and MacDonald, who were invested in “the myth of the individual”; one could criticize *Fear of Flying* as narcissistic, but the novel’s feminist view of men and masculinity redeemed it. Generally speaking, students found that literature at this level made fewer, less rigorous demands than literature at the level of the Great Books. “Popular literature” courses appealed strongly to the growing mass of students recruited to higher education by the steady lowering of admissions standards. The courses were themselves *popular*. In addition, the subject matter of such courses exercised its allure on instructors, especially on those with a strongly left-liberal, society-changing attitude. It is much easier to harness naïve prose than it is to harness the classics to regimes of indoctrination. (I except Paredes.) The trouble with Joseph Conrad or Fyodor Dostoyevsky is that they identify the swindler.

For various reasons, some of them thoroughly cynical, “popular culture” and “culture studies” became mainstays of the humanities in higher education. Like most other humanities courses, popular culture courses today mainly serve the usual politically correct program of the existing dominant class in the academy. Nevertheless, such courses can also be a powerful tool for instructors who wish to exercise criticism of contemporary institutions and actively resist the degenerative trends that hold our society in their grip. The purpose of this essay is to suggest how this might be done.

The Origins of Popular Culture

As a plethora of terms clutters both the idea of and the instructional approach to popular culture, this discussion requires some lexical clearing of the ground. The notion of popular culture first emerged in the early modern period, coincident with intensified town- and city-life, the expansion of the market, and the diffusion of literacy. Sophisticated people who read books began to notice the difference between their own literate perspective on society and nature and the tradition-based perspective, as held by villagers, country folk, and the town- and city-dwelling unlettered. An early, judicious

sense of this difference appears in *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, whose eponymous aristocrat stands in contrast to his *factotum* Sancho Panza. Parallel contrasts between sophisticates and yokels (even perceptive ones like Sancho) emerge in Shakespeare, in figures like Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Falstaff in the Henry plays, as compared to characters of station. In the eighteenth century, the more narrowly focused notion of peasant culture came into usage in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and rather more especially in that of Johan Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Rousseau, taking a few cues from Lucretius, sketched out a developmental anthropology in which the human race graduates, by many stages, from primitive solitude to modern bourgeois existence.

In his *Discourse on Inequality* (1754), Rousseau argues for the bourgeois dispensation as no less than a pathological condition. A healthy society might be located, according to Rousseau, in the type of republic represented ideally by Rome in its earliest manifestation. The customs of countryside and village preserved something of that ancient simplicity, Rousseau thought, not least in the non-reflective mentality of the unlettered peasantry. “If nature destined us to be healthy,” he writes, “I would almost venture to assert that the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal.”¹

Herder took into consideration many of the same phenomena as Rousseau, assessing them, I would say, more rigorously. Whereas for Rousseau, premodern society loomed as something generic, for Herder proper thinking could only come to grips with premodern societies in their plurality one-by-one, precisely as *this* or *that* distinct folk culture. The genre of premodern societies existed, to be sure, but it was the cultural phenotype that signified. In *Fragments on Recent German Literature* (1768), Herder proposes aphoristically that “each nation speaks in accordance with its thought and thinks in accordance with its speech.”² Indeed:

If then each original language which is the native growth of a country develops in accordance with its climate and region, if each national language forms itself in accordance with the ethics and manner of thought of its people, then conversely, a country’s literature which is

¹Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984), 85.

²Johan Gottfried Herder, *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 50.

original and national must form itself in accordance with such a nation's original language in such a way that the two run together.³

Moreover, Herder understands that literacy marks an epoch whenever it appears, preserving something of tradition, as in Homer, but also opening up a hiatus that the literate cross only with great difficulty.

Between them, Rousseau and Herder established two important precepts of anthropology. One is the evolutionary idea that culture begins with a few simple forms, from which a people differentiates new and more complex forms. Another is that the folk culture can survive, tenuously, in various ways into the era of civilization and that such survival preserves a wisdom that is *other* than the wisdom codified in the sophisticated arts and sciences.

Thus Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) distinguished in theoretical terms between the “naïve” and the “sentimental” in poetry and art. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm sought out and edited the *Märchen*, or folktales, of the villagers and peasants; and later on, in the early decades of the twentieth century, composers like Bela Bartók (1881–1945) and Gustav Holst (1874–1934) went into the field to collect and preserve the treasure-trove of rural folk music and song. In addition to these “naïve” forms of primitive and folk culture, however, artists and scholars beginning in the sixteenth century have also taken interest in civic diversions and entertainments as cultivated at different levels of society. For example, the popularity of chivalric literature among the bourgeois reading public is a recurrent topic in *Don Quixote*. In the painterly work of the members of the Bruegel family, who were contemporaries of Cervantes, one also finds many studies of peasant custom as well as bourgeois *divertissement*. Of interest are *Children's Games* and *The Kermesse of Saint George*, in which the artists bring a scientific attitude to the depiction, in detail, of the customs of daily life.

With the rise of modernity, especially with the growth of the industrial city, customs like those enshrined in *Children's Games* had come to seem uniquely valuable. One impulse behind the passionate folksong collecting of Bartók and Holst, for example, was the sense that modernity, steadily extending itself everywhere, posed a threat to tradition that in turn menaced a nation's cultural life with disorientation and rootlessness. A narrower perception, which begins to articulate itself in the early nineteenth century, sees in technology the primary threat to old ways of life and thus also to the

³Ibid.

continuity of custom and tradition. In a series of books that offers much for a non-ideological approach to teaching popular culture, Neil Postman (1931–2003) revived this Romantic view and explored its increasing relevancy in a world reorganizing itself around digitized, on-demand services that gratify all wishes instantaneously. Postman usefully distinguishes popular culture, which is all but extinct, from *commercial culture* or *mass entertainment culture*, as they emerged in the twentieth century.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Postman reminds readers that the beginnings of the photographic and electronic media lie with the first half of the nineteenth century.⁴ Photography and telegraphy, for example, were part of the fabric of life in the West by 1850, sound recording and motion pictures by 1900. Postman cites Henry David Thoreau for his prescience about the way in which technical innovation alters the idea of what constitutes knowledge, or what constitutes a value, for worse rather than for better.

In *Walden*, for example, Thoreau cannily foresees that one effect of the new form of instantaneous communication called telegraphy will be to settle its miraculous prestige on the dissemination of trivia, of the kind already found in gossipy local journalism. “Thoreau grasped,” Postman writes, “that the telegraph would create its own definition of discourse; that it would not only permit but insist upon a conversation between Maine and Texas; and it would require the content of that conversation to be different from what Typographic Man was accustomed to.”⁵

Morse code would see to that. In the same way, the accident that Edison’s acoustic cylinders and the early shellac platters could accommodate about three minutes of speech or music set the parameters for commercial song that obtain to this day. The cylinder and platter also established the notion that each acoustic item functioned independently or, in Postman’s phrase, “without a context,” just like a random “item” in a newspaper. These mechanical and electrical *media*, through their simple existence, “gave a form of legitimacy to context-free information” and created entertainment in the form of a “commodity.”⁶

⁴Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, twentieth anniversary ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁵Ibid., 65.

⁶Ibid.

Popular Culture Versus Commercial Culture

We begin to have a sense of what a serious, historically informed approach to the study of popular culture involves: first, a concept of culture; next, a concept of primitive and folk cultures in their variety and in comparison with urbane or bourgeois culture; then, a sense of the history of cultural development and how technical innovations gave rise to twentieth-century forms of commercial entertainment; and finally the understanding that the rise of commercial entertainment—“mass media”—entailed oblivion for pre-technical cultural forms.

In addition, competent administration of such a curriculum requires an accurate sense of where the typical undergraduate stands with relation to America’s folk culture heritage (overwhelmingly British and otherwise European), his degree of literate achievement, and the primary forces that have shaped his present mental and cultural state. I have strong convictions about these matters, the articulation of which has, however, never failed to elicit the charge of “blaming students.” Yet a wide range of other observers offers the same generalizations.

The analyses of Mark Bauerlein, Neil Postman, Roger Scruton, and Carson Holloway concerning the cognitive limitations and emotional structure of what one might call the *modern mediated adolescent* represent, in fact, a noticeable convergence of judgment. I could also cite my own descriptions in a series of articles early in 2010 for the John William Pope Center for Higher Education.⁷ Bauerlein refers to the cut-and-paste disposition fostered by the Internet and video games, a mentality (so to speak) that “searches for information” but is otherwise “too impatient for the long-term acquisition of facts and stories and principles.”⁸ In Bauerlein’s summary, “the model is information retrieval, not knowledge formation,” so that in contemporary school assignments “the material passes from Web to homework paper without lodging in the minds of students.”⁹ According to Bauerlein, electronic devices with screens have a degenerative effect on cognition in young people, and immersion in electronically mediated recreation “conditions minds against quiet, concerted

⁷They are: “Can’t Read, Can’t Write, Can’t Comprehend,” January 28, 2010, http://www.popecenter.org/clarion_call/article.html?id=2297; “Literacy Lost,” February 4, 2010, http://www.popecenter.org/clarion_call/article.html?id=2300; and “Forget U,” http://www.popecenter.org/clarion_call/article.html?id=2303.

⁸Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008), 94.

⁹Ibid.

study, sequential analysis of texts, against an idle afternoon with a detective story and nothing else.”¹⁰

In the 1980s, Postman recognized an earlier, yet already severe stage of the identical stupor. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* he describes how the new technically mediated entertainment culture, as it consolidated itself in the mid-twentieth century, “denied interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence.”¹¹ The Lifeworld of the person acculturated in what Postman calls the “peek-a-boo” milieu is one in which “now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again,”¹² with the effect that time becomes discontinuous because the mind never learns to keep track of large-scale temporal structures. Typographic Culture in what Postman calls the “Age of Exposition” inculcated the mind precisely to linearity and causality.

Both Roger Scruton and Carson Holloway comment on the modern debasement of music. In *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture* (2008), Scruton notes that whereas “until recently the song has been detachable from the performer,” in contemporary pop music for adolescents “singer and song are fused.”¹³ The “lead singer projects *himself* and not the melody,” which partly explains “the melodic paucity of the music.” The merging of singer and song, mediated by the technology of the sound studio and therefore completely synthetic, “promotes another and more mysterious fusion—that between the singer and the fan.”¹⁴

The second type of fusion entails for Scruton the rejection of the larger adult society, with its demand for productive discipline and moderation of the appetites. In *All Shook Up: Music, Passion, and Politics* (2001), Holloway observes that youth music must constantly raise its own so-called transgressive ante. Thus, “in the most recent controversial rock and rap... the pleasures of the spirited part of the soul are [debased] to an equality with sex, and anger is embraced for its own sake and not merely as a defender of the rights of the body.”¹⁵ Yet Holloway also plausibly suggests that “our

¹⁰Ibid., 95.

¹¹Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 77.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture* (South Bend, IN: Saint Augustine’s Press, 2008), 109.

¹⁴Ibid., 109, 111.

¹⁵Carson Holloway, *All Shook Up: Music, Passion, and Politics* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2001), 180.

sexually and violently obscene popular music appears as an increasingly unwholesome but nonetheless understandable reaction on the part of the young to the spiritual poverty of liberal modernity.”¹⁶

Holloway calls it “popular music,” but it is really not that at all. It is rather, as Postman and Scruton argue, *commercial culture*, and it belongs to the category of entertainment commodities marketed to adolescents by the showbiz industry, one aim of which is to prevent the maturation of the consumer’s taste. The product of this industry accosts one ubiquitously. In addition to being violent and pornographic, commercial culture is thoroughly suffused by the strictures of political correctness. In their mental dispositions, their emotional tendencies, their very postures, gestures, and hand-eye patterns, contemporary college students are the creatures made from this toxic mixture, to which have recently been added the distractions of portable videogames and cell phones (Bauerlein’s “screens”). Whether by design or by accident, such people constitute a perfect subject population for politically correct instruction, which is essentially propagandistic and mimetic, but they are stubbornly resistant to true liberal education, as inherited from the Typographic Age. Like Rousseau’s savage man they do not reflect.

Historical pre-1950 popular culture, in which the habit of reflection still functions, might well be the *stuff* to provoke such young people into reflection, especially when coupled with an aggressive critique of their own totems, cults, unquestioned prefabricated opinions, and carefully inculcated politically correct prejudices.

How *Not* to Teach Popular Culture

A survey of current literature on the topics of teaching “popular culture” and “culture studies” will illustrate what I wished emphatically *not* to do when the opportunity arose to teach the namesake course offered by my department. The literature suggests that most practitioners of the field think narrowly within the confines of the predictable postmodern frame of mind—that is, they are obsessed by the profane trinity of race, class, and sex (which they call gender), hostile to tradition, and determined to fix their students in radical attitudes that alienate them from inherited norms. The radicals regard the norms as toxic. Thus we find the author of the *Journal of Popular*

¹⁶Ibid., 181.

Culture article, “Practicing Oprah; or the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism,” asserting that “Oprah’s disavowal of religious doctrine is a slight [*sic*] of hand” because “she endorses some modes of theological existence, but dislikes many more”; and “[t]he only way that religion works for Oprah is if it is carefully coordinated with capitalist pleasure.”¹⁷

Another *Journal* author, in “Reading Wonder Woman’s Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation,” concludes that “Wonder Woman’s body constitutes a historical site for the interplay of the culturally oppositional spheres of femininity vs. (masculine) nation, private sexuality vs. public politics/war, and relationships vs. action in battle.”¹⁸ Yet another *Journal* author, addressing the bare midriff of Britney Spears, hazards that “[t]he bare-midriff fashion is a sign of freedom—not so much a matter of comfort, as freedom from social control, from conventions falling with unequal rigor upon women as compared with men.”¹⁹

When turning to these writers’ justifications for bringing these interests into the classroom in dedicated courses, one finds the same low level of intellectual content and the same anti-normative hostility. Ray B. Browne’s *Popular Culture Studies Across the Curriculum* (2005) denounces “old-fashioned historians like Gertrude Himmelfarb,” extols women’s studies because this field “challenges the ways that knowledge and dominant models of research have been riddled with sexist assumptions,” and recommends integrating popular culture in the classroom “to address the interpenetration of race, class, and gender.”²⁰ Typically, instructors of popular culture courses assume that their students, like the unenlightened classes generally, do not possess *the proper knowledge* and therefore *think wrongly*. In this view, students, not having internalized postmodern theory about race, class, and gender, still live in oppressive false consciousness and perpetuate it through prejudice and conformity. Now, what I assume students do not know—about popular culture or anything else—differs sharply from what politically

¹⁷Kathryn Lofton, “Practicing Oprah; or the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 4 (August 2006): 616.

¹⁸Mitra C. Emad, “Reading Wonder Woman’s Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 6 (December 2006): 979.

¹⁹Dennis Hall, “Spears’ Space: The Play of Innocence and Experience in the Bare-Midriff Fashion,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 6 (December 2006): 1032.

²⁰Ray B. Browne, ed., *Popular Culture Studies Across the Curriculum: Essays for Educators* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2005), 57, 105, 141.

correct professors assume students do not know, although I too regard student ignorance and prejudice as a function of a type of conformism.

One element of that conformism is how students assimilate through commercial culture a postmodern relativism that is actually dogmatically anti-normative. By a poignant irony, “cutting-edge theory” is merely the academic brand of crass commercial culture in which modern North American society swims; and students, far from being ignorant of it, are fused with it by inculcation that begins in kindergarten.

Like the inveterate professorial readers of and contributors to the *Journal of Popular Culture*, students are stuck in an eternal, history-less present, transfixed by ever-meaningless yet superficially ever-changing *fashion*. Not only have the students not read *Don Quixote* or *Moby Dick*, their awareness—even at the level of the music and films they consume without reflection (because history-less people find it difficult to reflect) extends back only a few years to the items that swiftly and adamantly fossilized their taste when they attended the eighth grade.

One can readily see this in the students who enroll in my department’s popular culture course, entitled “Modern Culture and Media,” which serves as the feeder-course for students interested in the local film studies program and emphasizes film. The emphasis on film in the college catalog description leads many students to enroll in the course in expectation of a passive entertainment experience, an attitude that exacerbates their preexisting antipathy to intellectual rigor. I thought the course somewhat misnamed and shifted the terms to “Modern Media and Culture” on my syllabus. It struck me that the modern technical media constituted the cause and that a transformation of the culture was the effect.

Provoking students to see that they are not free from moral and material causality figured centrally in my plan for the semester, which began with a hefty dose of serious reading in the real theory of culture. That meant excerpts from Genesis, especially the Expulsion from Eden and Cain and Abel; excerpts from Rousseau (*Discourse on Inequality*) and Herder (*Essay on the Origin of Language*); and excerpts from work by two actual theoreticians of culture whose thinking diverges strongly from the academy’s *Marxist* norm, René Girard and Eric Gans.²¹ Girard and Gans understand

²¹René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) and Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

the degree-zero of language, consciousness, and culture to be *injunction*, that is, the commandment to observe certain rules of behavior. They both also see injunction not as oppression, but as the real liberation from the dumbness of animal nature into humanity and integrity.

Students would read Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and Scruton's *Guide to Modern Culture* in their entirety. Rousseau's argument that those people are happiest who live "only in the sensation of... present existence"²² makes a powerful contrast when yoked in dialectic with Herder's argument that "reflection is characteristically peculiar to man and essential to his species," and that man "manifests reflection when, confronted by the hovering dream of images...he can collect himself into a moment of wakefulness" productive of a "clear concept."²³

Girard in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* and Gans in *The End of Culture* both usefully link culture to *cult* and argue for a type of ethical progress, based on critical reflection, from sacrificially organized societies to post-sacrificial societies. Girard and Gans also emphasize the role of *resentment* and *mimesis* in culture, the aim of injunction being to channel and diffuse the conflict-producing acquisitive mimesis that the King James Bible refers to as covetousness. Early in the semester, in the context of Rousseau, Herder, Girard, and Gans, discussion of the two Genesis episodes provided an opportunity for students to think (most likely for the first time) in fundamental terms about the character of what is called culture.

In Eden, Adam and Eve possess self-awareness to the extent that they acknowledge the sole injunction forbidding the fruit of the one tree. The serpent, excluded from the ban, and resenting the status that the ban confers on Adam and Eve, convinces Eve, by appealing to her vanity, to excuse herself from the injunction. Eve convinces Adam to imitate her. In so doing, Adam necessarily imitates Eve's resentment. The immediate upshot of violating the sole injunction is that Adam and Eve require a new sole injunction, the one against their nakedness. Gans writes, "The *felix culpa* is nothing but resentment in action."²⁴

Again, in Cain's wickedness, resentment becomes a theme, but the narrative adds the insight that resentment provokes violence. On this

²²Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 90.

²³Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language*, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language: Two Essays*, trans., with afterword, John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 115–16.

²⁴Gans, *End of Culture*, 195.

foundation it is possible for students to understand a claim both Girard and Gans make. Works of art, including works of narrative art, fall into two broad categories: those that reveal resentment and those that exploit resentment.

Turning It Around

That students, in addition to being stupefied by the flashing, squawking, digitized world, are steeped in the resentment-indulgence of the prevailing left-liberal anti-ethos is attested by the written statements I regularly collect from my composition course clientele in response to this apothegm by Heraclitus: “Since mindfulness, of all things, is the ground of being, to speak one’s true mind, and to keep things known in common, serves all being, just as laws made clear uphold the city.”²⁵ Here are three typical student reactions: (1) “If everyone had the same thoughts then there would be no point of conversing with anyone because everyone will have the same position on everything and they would be like mindless robots all doing the same thing”; (2) “I think you should learn what you want, when you want, and how much you want”; (3) “Uniformity of thought when shared by all men does not breed diversity, [which] is necessary for expression and leads to more avenues of advancement in the arts and in culture.”

The narcissism of the “uniqueness” to which undergraduates lay vehement claim belongs to the cultural pattern of identifying all inherited authority as tyranny. Of course, anyone who reflects will see the contradiction when, in response to the question “Who here regards himself as unique?” all hands shoot up at once. When nine out of ten students interpret the observation that clear speech and the shared belief in basic premises are necessary for community by condemning it as a call for conformity, then real conformity and the resentment underlying it begin to be visible.

The civic determination that Heraclitus calls “keep[ing] things known in common” means, in part, cultivating the lore that edifies the entire community in a resentment-sublimating way. The contemporary commercial pattern of addressing particular segments of the public, especially the “youth” segment, runs destructively in the opposite direction. In the beginning of the semester I asked students whether they could sing any of the songs their grandparents or great-grandparents had known and sung. The

²⁵Heraclitus, *Fragments*, frag. 91, trans. Brooks Haxton (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), 59.

answer, as I have detailed in “Forget U,” was *none*, which implied both a discontinuity and a domain of ignorance and thus occasioned broaching the topic of popular music before rock and roll. I led the students through a concise history of Anglophone balladry, broadside song, pub song, parlor song, and music hall song, with the aim of comparing examples from the survey with examples of contemporary rock and roll. The discussion would draw on Scruton’s merciless critique of youth culture in the “Yoofanasia” chapter of his *Guide*. A practical assignment—to learn and perform *in class* a folksong, ballad, parlor song, or vaudeville song—made it difficult for students to refute Scruton’s insistence that while contemporary “pop” music is an unsingable studio-artifice and a piece of property, the old “corny” songs lend themselves to enjoyable performance by just about anyone.

As it happened, students liked bellowing out Harry Champion’s “A Little Bit of Cucumber” and Henry Clay Work’s “Grandfather’s Clock.” “Music,” as Scruton writes, when “properly constructed, has a life of its own and is always more interesting than the person who performs it.”²⁶ I’m not claiming that students suddenly converted to the sensibility of their great-grandparents; I only say that exposure to this music, which they would never have accessed on their own, made their extraordinary aversion to anything outside the domain of what pours through their earbuds somewhat less ferocious than before. Female students, for example, reacted positively to “My Thing Is My Own,” a seventeenth-century song, the lyrics to which I made available to the class while we listened to it in a recording by the Baltimore Consort. “My Thing Is My Own” is a singable, savvy ditty whose lyric persona does not object to sex, which she understands frankly enough even while remaining chaste, but to the mendacious cads who make non-marriage-related bids for her “thing.” The words are smart enough in conceit and rhyme to rise to the level of literature. A lesson in attitudinal contrast suddenly becomes available by measuring various contemporary songs against “My Thing.”

It is possible by steps to disarm the stock emotional reactions students have as they attempt to fend off analyses of their worldview by the likes of Scruton. And by just that much can one drag them from the pubertal isolation in which commercial culture has ensconced them toward a more informed understanding of artistic merit.

²⁶Scruton, *Guide*, 110.

With Scruton and Postman in mind, and with reference to Girard and Gans, I devoted a unit of the course to what I call “popular literate culture”: the phenomenon of the so-called *pulps* or genre-specific fiction magazines that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and disappeared with the advent of television. The pulps attest to the widespread literacy of their period but also forecast the segmentation of a common readership into niche audiences during the postwar era. Certain features of certain famous examples of pulp fiction nevertheless recommend themselves, particularly the deference to normative ethics in Edgar Rice Burroughs-type heroic narrative (*Tarzan, A Princess of Mars*) and again in Raymond Chandler-type private eye narrative.

The syllabus of “Modern Media and Culture” did not require students to read from the pulps; rather, I presented considerable plot summary and pointed out representative passages in lecture. Students in the “Science Fiction” course that I regularly teach do read Burroughs, however, and invariably express their admiration for the moral clarity of the storytelling and the dignity of the heroines, who are on par with the heroes, but correspond in no way to feminist ideology.²⁷ In Burroughs, as in Homer and *Beowulf*, resentment drives wickedness; as in Genesis evil expresses itself in murder.

The syllabus of “Modern Media and Culture” also included a number of films, either in excerpt or in their entirety. I have written elsewhere about student reaction to Michael Powell’s *I Know Where I’m Going* (1944), which I reserved to the end of the semester and which students addressed in their final examination. The Errol Flynn vehicle, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), directed by Michael Curtiz, owes much to heroic narrative and medieval balladry. It shares with “Burroughsian narrative” a strong ethical vision, and Curtiz conspicuously refuses to aim the film at a niche audience. On the contrary, no adolescents appear in the story; the characters are adults. The film’s appeal is adult, involving the expectation that to appreciate it children and adolescents must rise to the adult level. The dialogue is noticeably literate.

The context of the film is still Postman’s Typographic Man. The themes of justice and of lawful rule, of dignity as belonging to civilization and of *libido* as belonging to savagery, have serious civic implications. The

²⁷See my “Edgar Rice Burroughs and Masculine Narrative,” *Brussels Journal*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/4066>.

Prince John/King Richard rivalry can be understood in terms of the resentment pattern of the Cain and Abel story. Even the film's musical score has a meaning. Composed by Erich Korngold, it is fully symphonic and incorporates a number of medieval tunes, including "Sumer ys ycumen in." The film is in many respects a Wagnerian opera with spoken dialogue.

Baby boomers know *The Adventures of Robin Hood* because it used to show regularly on television. Today's students, by and large, have never encountered it. This fact allowed me to reinforce an argument I had been making since the first day of the semester: that contemporary commercial culture, cynically manipulating the notion of "the latest thing," is ruthlessly anti-mnemonic, anti-traditional, and anti-adult.

One more thing about *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. It ends not with sex, but with marriage. I have come to believe, as does Scruton and to some extent Bauerlein, that students inarticulately dislike what they are, including their own brutal eroticism. To paraphrase Scruton, the anguished incoherency of the songs that music industry moguls and publicity men induce students to buy gives voice, indirectly and inadvertently, to this discomfort; yet wickedly, the same entertainment culture, operating in synergy with the liberal mandate, deprives students of any of the tools requisite to transcending their melancholy. Towards the end of the semester I confronted the class with an essay on high and low art by Eric Gans. "We are not ennobled but debased," writes Gans, "when we affect to cleanse ourselves by applauding as art the resentments of the 'oppressed.' Indulging in guilt is no more a part of high culture than indulging in self-righteousness."²⁸ The *one way* to wean students from the guilt and self-righteousness of the politically correct regime is to expose them to the world that existed prior to it.

²⁸Eric Gans, "Art, High and Popular," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 223, December 23, 2000, <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw223.htm>.