

**A TEACHING NOTE:
INCORPORATING POPULAR CULTURE INTO A HISTORY
CLASSROOM**

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Many historians, whether teaching in the schools or at the college level, moan when the ubiquitous popular culture begins to intrude into every aspect of our lives, including the classroom, making all of us somewhat unwilling participants in a version of reality television. Thus, there often is a natural reluctance by history teachers to grant space and time for popular culture in the classroom. On the other hand, popular culture is an essential aspect of the past as well as the present, ranging from Harriet Beecher's Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to MTV, the iPod, and the iPad. Bringing popular culture into the classroom should help teachers to gain the attention of some students seemingly obsessed with film, television, popular music, sport, and video games. But of greater significance is that the inclusion of popular culture should enrich student understanding and appreciation for the past. During the last quarter century, I often have incorporated popular culture into my eleventh-grade American history class and a senior history elective examining post-World War II America through the Hollywood narrative film. My experience with popular culture in these college preparatory classes has been a positive one and some of them could be incorporated on the college level as well as the schools. In fact, with increasing emphasis in the schools on teaching to the test, these observations might have more validity for teaching history at the college and university level.

The study of popular culture in the classroom often focuses upon film. The introduction of popular culture into the classroom, however, need not be limited to the medium of film. Students love music, and although I have little technical musical knowledge, it is worthwhile to incorporate music into the curriculum whenever possible, whether it is a historical tune or a contemporary piece of music. An interesting exercise, although a difficult one to evaluate, is having the students compose and perform their own songs about a historical topic. One successful music project that I have added to the survey course follows our reading of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In an effort to demonstrate that the image of Tom Joad remains relevant to contemporary American culture, we listen to Woody Guthrie's "The Ballad of Tom Joad," followed by Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad" performed as a ballad, and conclude with a video clip of Rage against the Machine's performance of "The Ghost of Tom Joad." Flinging myself off a desk into a mosh pit of students is not getting any easier at my age, but it does make the point. Music is also a wonderful vehicle through which to study the civil rights movement, labor history, and an era of protest such as the 1960s.

Although teens like to think of themselves as quite sophisticated, most still enjoy watching cartoons. Accordingly, I have developed a brief World War II Warner Brothers cartoon unit that students greet with a great deal of enthusiasm. After screening some derogatory racial images of the Japanese, students begin to understand the role played by popular culture in paving the way for internment of Japanese-Americans and dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some of the more racist cartoons are difficult to obtain today, so I supplement the anti-Japanese cartoons with a Buck Rogers comic strip entitled "The Monkey-Men from Planet X" (1943). The title characters are depicted as descendants of the Japanese who escaped American revenge by fleeing into space, where they devolved to their original primitive state.¹ This is pretty vile stuff, and often quite upsetting to students of Japanese ancestry, but if handled carefully it can make a powerful statement. Students are also quick to notice that in contrast with the Japanese images, the war cartoons demonize Hitler but not the German people.

The cartoon unit also does a good job of introducing the Cold War and McCarthyism. Students are aware of American paranoia in the 1950s regarding the USSR and communism, which means that they sometimes struggle to perceive the Soviet Union as an American ally during the Second World War. Rather than screening a segment from the rather dull and controversial *Mission to Moscow* (1943), we examine a 1943 cartoon entitled "Gremlins from the Kremlin," in which folksy Russian gremlins and Joseph Stalin prevent Hitler from personally bombing Moscow. The contrast between the image of kindly "Uncle Joe" Stalin and the bloody tyrant of the late 1940s set on world domination is most transparent to students who recognize the power of propaganda to move us from one extreme to another.² This understanding perhaps had renewed resonance in more recent times when we remember evolving public perceptions of Saddam Hussein in Iraq at the early stages of the War on Terror.

I would also encourage teachers at all levels of education to share their passions with their students. Of course, one must be careful, because sometimes there is a thin line between sharing a passion and boring others. But students need to see a human face from their teachers and professors. Accordingly, I include a short unit in the curriculum on baseball, which is my passion but not necessarily that of the students. Using themes of gender and race, we examine how baseball reflects larger cultural trends. Certainly major league baseball work stoppages allow plenty of opportunity to discuss labor issues and the values of a society that lavishes so much money on athletes but so little on education. We cap off the unit with a field trip to the local minor league

¹"Monkey Men from Planet X," (1943) in Robert C. Dille, ed., *The Collected Works of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* (New York: Chelsea House, 1969).

²"Gremlins from the Kremlin," or as it was originally called "Russian Rhapsody" (1944), is available in *Bugs and Daffy: Wartime Cartoons* (MGM/UA Home Video: 1998), videocassette.

franchise in Albuquerque. That experience was not possible for some years after the city lost its Pacific Coast League franchise to Portland. But baseball returned to Albuquerque in the spring of 2003, after voters approved a fifteen million dollar bond issue to renovate the existing stadium. The politics of stadium construction provided an opportunity for a first-hand account of how business often relies upon government and taxpayer support. The impact of popular culture was also evident in the naming of the new franchise. Many residents preferred the term Albuquerque Dukes, the name of the previous franchise depicting the influence of Hispanic culture upon the city, but the previous franchise owned the rights to the Dukes name. The new ownership moved in the direction of popular culture and away from historic origins, naming the team the Albuquerque Isotopes after an episode of the popular Simpsons television show in which Homer Simpson is terrified that the evil mayor of Albuquerque will steal his Springfield baseball team and christen them the Isotopes. The nomenclature has worked; for the team is selling a lucrative amount of merchandise, and, of course, the first pitch for the new franchise was thrown out by a caricature of Homer Simpson.

My use of popular culture, of course, is one way to draw students into the study of American history. But I also want them to be able to apply what they have learned, which means writing essays based on the movies, music, cartoons, and more that we discuss in the classroom. As much as students enjoy the baseball field trip and study of popular culture, they complain sometimes that the class requires too much writing. It is certainly a burden on my time to evaluate all of the papers, but students need the experience of applying what they have learned by making an argument based upon logical reasoning and clear historical examples. The focal point for student writing is the traditional term or research paper. The guidelines for this assignment include a fifteen-to-twenty page double-spaced essay, endnotes, and a bibliography of fifteen-to-twenty sources of which at least half must be primary sources. One of the first issues that arises with research papers is what should the students write about in American history. To this perennial question, I have a simple response: Write about what interests you. It is somewhat of a cliché, but I try to point out to students that everyone and everything has a history. Having some ownership in the topic makes it easier for students to commit the time and effort which such a project entails.

However, I should attach a couple of caveats to this exposition on student ownership. Popular culture subjects, such as contemporary music, are often the first choices for research, but students soon realize that placing topics such as rock music within historical and cultural context is not an easy undertaking. To make a popular culture paper work requires considerable background reading and the analytical ability to make connections that are not always readily apparent between historical events and cultural sources. In other words, the popular culture topics, if done properly, require higher-level thinking skills. Accordingly, popular culture can be introduced in the history classroom not as a substitute for traditional historical thinking but as a means through which to foster such skills as researching and writing and, as I said at the start, to gain and retain the attention of some students.