

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

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### Units in My Class

<b>Unit 1: Racial Ideology and Miscegenation, 1900-1920</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Birth of a Nation</i> (1915)</li><li>• 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.</li></ul>
<p>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 <i>Birth of a Nation</i>, 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, <i>Birth</i> and the career of Jack Johnson both illustrate the importance of gender to understanding racial discourse; the perceived sexual threat of black men to white women crucially shapes the racial ideology of the period.</p>	
<b>Unit 2: Gender and the Culture Wars of the 1920s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sources (articles, photographs, cartoons) describing changes in women’s fashion, hairstyle, dating practices, dance hall behavior, as well as advertisements depicting and targeting women</li></ul>
<p>This unit is built on the 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. This paradigm 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.</p>	
<b>Unit 3: The American Dream and the Potency of the Individual in 1930s America</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Scarface</i> (1932)</li><li>• <i>I Was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang</i> (1932)</li><li>• <i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i> (1939)</li><li>• <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> (1940)</li></ul>
<p>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 <i>Scarface</i> 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 <i>Fugitive</i> finds himself reduced to criminality despite being virtuous, intelligent and hard-working; in <i>Grapes</i>, the protagonist and his family nobly persevere but find themselves at the whim of exploitative businesses and corrupt local officials; in <i>Mr. Smith</i>, 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 today: 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?</p>	
<b>Unit 4: Why We Fight—</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pre-war Interventionist and Isolationist Political Cartoons</li></ul>

<b>Popular Culture and Propaganda during World War II</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Why We Fight: Prelude to War</i> (1942)</li> <li>• <i>Casablanca</i> (1942)</li> <li>• World War II Propaganda Posters</li> </ul>
<p>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 <i>Why We Fight</i> that was produced by Frank Capra for the U.S. Army. Then students explore the propagandistic implications of <i>Casablanca</i>, 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?</p>	
<b>Unit 5: Anti-Communism and Cold War Popular Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>On the Waterfront</i> (1954)</li> <li>• <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> (1956)</li> <li>• <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i> (1962, based on 1954 book)</li> <li>• <i>The Twilight Zone</i>: “Eye of the Beholder” (1960) and “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street” (1960)</li> </ul>
<p>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 <i>On the Waterfront</i> as a parable about Director Elia Kazan’s decision to testify before HUAC; analyze <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> in order to shed light on fears of infiltration, conspiracy, and conformity; explore how <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i> simultaneously depicts a malevolent Communist conspiracy while criticizing McCarthyite hysteria; and finally, unpack the liberal anti-Communism of the <i>Twilight Zone</i>, which both explored the threat of Communist totalitarianism and critiqued hysterical responses to that threat.</p>	
<b>Unit 6: Gender Ideology and the 1950s Domestic Sitcom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I Love Lucy</i>: “Job Switching” (1952)</li> <li>• <i>The Honeymooners</i>: excerpts from three 1955 episodes</li> <li>• <i>Father Knows Best</i>: “Betty, Girl Engineer” (1956)</li> </ul>
<p>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 shows the women accepting those traditional roles.</p>	
<b>Unit 7: Rock &amp; Roll, Racial Integration, and Juvenile Delinquency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examples of early 1950s rhythm and blues and mainstream pop.</li> <li>• Examples of white covers of black R&amp;B originals</li> <li>• Examples of Rock &amp; Roll stars (Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley)</li> </ul>
<p>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.</p>	
<b>Unit 8: The</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music: The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Woodstock Festival, etc.</li> </ul>

<b>Counterculture and the Legacy of the “Sixties” in American Political Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trends in Counterculture Fashion</li> <li>• <i>Ms. Magazine</i></li> <li>• Depictions of homosexuality in popular culture (articles in popular periodicals, clips from films like <i>Boys in the Band</i>)</li> <li>• The career of Muhammad Ali (interviews with Ali from the 1960s provide excellent primary source material)</li> </ul>
<p>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 <i>Ms. Magazine</i> 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.”</p>	
<b>Unit 9: The White Working Class in the 1970s and the Seeds of the Reagan Revolution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>All in the Family</i>: “Meet the Bunkers” and “Lionel Moves Into the Neighborhood” (1971)</li> <li>• <i>Rocky</i> (1976)</li> <li>• <i>Saturday Night Fever</i> (1977)</li> </ul>
<p>This unit focuses on depictions of the white working class during the 1970s. Episodes of <i>All in the Family</i> explicitly explore political culture by providing a liberal criticism of the reactionary conservative politics of the so-called silent majority. Both <i>Rocky</i> and <i>Saturday Night Fever</i> 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 ascendance of the Reagan Revolution.</p>	
<b>Unit 10: Fighting the Power: Black Popular Culture in the late 1980s</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Style Wars</i> (1983)</li> <li>• Music: Public Enemy, N.W.A., Ice Cube, from 1988-1991</li> <li>• <i>Do the Right Thing</i> (1989)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Historical Background:</b> 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. After introducing these themes, the unit provides 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 NWA and Ice Cube. The unit culminates with discussion of the LA Riots and a reflection on the rise of mass incarceration.</p>	

### Recommended reading for teachers interested in learning more about these units

- **Unit 1**
  - Litwack, Leon. "The Birth of a Nation." In *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, edited by Mark C. Carnes, 136-41. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1995
  - Burns, Ken, dir. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. Screenplay by Geoffrey Ward. 2005. Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2005. DVD
- **Unit 2:**
  - Murphy, Mary. "' . . . 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.
- **Unit 3:**
  - McElvaine, Robert S. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. New York, NY: Times Books, 1984.
- **Unit 4:**
  - Dower, John W. "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*, edited by Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, 169-201. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996;
  - Mintz, Steven, and Randy Roberts, eds. *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*. 4th ed. N.p.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- **Unit 5:**
  - Mintz, Steven, and Randy Roberts, eds. *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*. 4th ed. N.p.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010
  - Samuels, Stuart. "The Age of Conspiracy and Conformity: Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)." In *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, edited by John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, 203-17. New York, NY: Ungar, 1979.
  - Kazan, Elia. "A Statement from Elia Kazan." *New York Times*, April 12, 1952, 7.
- **Unit 6:**
  - Davidson, James West, 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*, 364-94. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.
- **Unit 7:**
  - Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.
- **Unit 8:**
  - Farber, David, ed. *The Sixties: From Memory to History*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.
- **Unit 9:**
  - Cowie, Jefferson. *Stayin' Alive: the 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York, NY: New York Press, 2010.
- **Unit 10:**
  - Boyd, Todd. *Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997
  - Watkins, S. Craig. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

### Textual Analysis: While Studying a Text

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:

<b>Providing Background</b>	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 <i>Scarface</i> 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 <i>All in the Family</i> , 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.
<b>Preparing students to look for certain things when they study a text</b>	I give cues before some scenes to help focus students' attention on relevant aspects of the texts they are studying. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "As you watch, consider what image of the antebellum south is being presented in this scene"</li><li>• "I want you to pay attention to how the black characters are depicted in this scene"</li><li>• "As you listen to this song, consider how the performing style differs from the song it is covering."</li><li>• "Think about this scene through the lens of class. What are we told about the class background and class aspirations of the two characters?"</li></ul>
<b>Providing Graphic Organizers</b>	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 help define those characters and themes. This notetaking 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.
<b>Having students describe images</b>	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.
<b>Stopping frequently to discuss key points</b>	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 30-45 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:

<b>Start with small group discussions</b>	Frequently, I split students into groups of 3-4 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.
<b>Map the characters</b>	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.
<b>Move from description to interpretation</b>	After laying out the “foundation” in earlier discussions, we move towards interpretation of historical significance. I ask students to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Make generalizations across the entire text:</b> “How are black characters generally depicted?”; “How do the male characters treat female characters?”</li><li>• <b>Determine author’s intent:</b> “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?”</li><li>• <b>Analyze “message”:</b> “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?”</li><li>• <b>Relate to historical context:</b> “What are some of the political tensions of the time that the character of Archie Bunker helps us understand?”; “What does this episode of <i>Father Knows Best</i> tell us about what behaviors were considered masculine and what were considered feminine?”</li><li>• <b>Weigh the validity of an argument:</b> “Does this episode support the argument that 1950s sitcoms reinforced traditional gender roles?”; “Do you agree with Cowie that <i>Rocky</i> ‘combines white blue-collar renewal with what borders on revenge against the success and power of black people’?”</li><li>• <b>Determine what a source “does”:</b> I encourage students to consider not just what a source “says” but what a source “does”—the ideological work performed by a given text. 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 <i>Birth of a Nation</i> are not merely depicting Reconstruction in a certain way; they are providing a portrait of the evils of Reconstruction that serve to <i>justify white supremacy and the legitimacy of Jim Crow</i>.</li></ul>
<b>Force students to cite evidence</b>	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:

<b>Cross-textual comparison</b>	I start by having students compare and contrast the sources from the unit. Here are some examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “What are some similarities and differences between the protagonists in the movies from this unit?”</li><li>• “How can you compare and contrast what each source is saying about the Communist threat?”</li><li>• “What are some commonalities between these different manifestations of the counterculture?”</li></ul>
<b>Connecting to historical context</b>	Then I 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “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?”</li><li>• “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?”</li><li>• “Collectively, do these sitcoms support the argument that mass media in the 1950s perpetuated the feminine mystique that Friedan identified?”</li><li>• “Taken together, what does the popularity of <i>Birth of a Nation</i> and the cultural response to Jack Johnson tell us about the way gender and racial ideology interacted in this period?”</li></ul>
<b>Modern Comparisons and Self-Reflection Questions</b>	At the end of units, I often have students make comparisons between the time period we are studying and our own society. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “How do we—as 21<sup>st</sup> century students in a history class—look at this text differently from its original audience?”</li><li>• “How is the debate about communist infiltration similar to modern debates about Islam and terrorism?”</li><li>• “Are women still depicted this way on television? Why or why not?”</li></ul>