American Popular Culture
American Popular Culture
Historical and Pedagogical Perspectives

Edited by

Seymour Leventman

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PRESS
for Paula, with everlasting love
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BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

For its annual conference the American Popular Culture Association subdivides its program into a number of fields. I chair the division on “Education and History of Popular Culture”. The papers included here were submitted to me as presented in my sessions at the annual PCA Conference held in San Diego, California, March 23-27, 2005. Although their focus conforms to the stated themes they also reflect the broader view that life in post-modern society increasingly reflects and indeed becomes a pop cultural phenomenon in itself. As in the classic British thriller film, “Dead of Night,” when the puppet takes on a life of its own eventually ruling its former master, so popular culture, especially in American society, has become autonomous, absorbing and ruling the society that spawned it.

The popularization of culture is a historical product emerging concurrently with the culture of the masses, i.e., peoples liberated from traditional class structures. So pop culture with its broadly appealing folk sources comes into play as expressions of political ideologies, supporting visual imagery on movie sound tracks, or as vehicles for selling products in TV mass advertising, as examples. As challenges to the elite intellectual life, pop culture becomes so popular as to replace previously common fonts of knowledge such as the Holy Bible. Educators are especially familiar with this development. Pop culture has engulfed and devoured virtually all of life from the secular (politics and news presentation) to the sacred (the death and installation of popes). Hence a volume encompassing some of these themes is especially timely and appealing.

This volume should be of special interest to experts in popular culture studies. In addition, with the growing number of pop culture courses at colleges and universities, this should become a widely used text. Students and critics of pop culture might also find uses for such a volume. Pop culture volumes already exist but not many are designed as texts. The present volume will also serve to dignify and legitimate the pop culture field by adding what has become a universal form of legitimation, published textual material.
As we enter into the new millennium, the forces of globalization appear to be moving faster and faster. In large part, these forces are carried by the powerful current of American ideals and are resulting in a large-scale infiltration upon the world of all things American. Economic policies around the globe are increasingly tied to American visions of capitalism and profit-making models, including the all-too-rapid deregulation of markets. Political policies are increasingly being shaped by American ideals of democracy, albeit often with resistance and often being imposed rather than being sought by the world’s citizens. And perhaps the most noticeable manifestation of the Americanization of the world can be seen through the almost ubiquitous existence of American popular culture throughout the world, even in some of the very most remote corners of our globe.

In the summer of 2002, I spent several weeks working in Kingston, Jamaica. There, I was leading a group of 20 youth from Canada and the US with the dual purpose of volunteering to work with the young people of the township of Riverton while educating the US and Canadian youth about the forces of globalization and their effect on real people in Jamaica. Riverton is an extremely poor area, and at the time Kingston was the murder capitol of the world. Water flowed down from the hills and made its way through a garbage dump on its way to the community in Riverton, and this was the water they drank and bathed in. Unsturdy and beat down shacks lined the shantytown village where the good people of Riverton lived, and the school where we were working was overcrowded, understaffed, and without the proper facilities to properly educate the students. One day, the school’s principal took me aside and led me to a special room that was locked and bolted and just behind the school. We went inside and I was shocked and amazed to find an air-conditioned room, a huge relief in the torrid heat of Jamaica, filled with nice desks and computers. The computers and funds to create the computer room had been donated by an American Foundation. The principal told me about the positive and negative effects that the computers were having on his school. On the positive side, his students were discovering a whole new world of information and gaining access to online encyclopedias, dictionaries, and educational websites. On the negative side, at least according to the principal, he told me that he had noticed some subtle and less subtle changes in the culture
of Riverton since the arrival of the computers. He noticed that students had become less respectful of teachers, sometimes expressing that they knew more than the teachers and sometimes resorting to language, phrases, and ways of emoting that were new to the township and illustrative of a breakdown of intergenerational respect. When he would pull his students aside to ascertain the source of their new language of disrespect and their new culture of insolence, inevitably all roads led back to the internet. The introduction of computers, and the access to popular culture that it brought, was having a noticeable effect on the township’s own culture.

One day later in the week, I noticed that the students were rapidly exiting the school and heading to the schoolyard. I followed behind them and came upon two students wielding knives and making threatening remarks to each other while the crowd of other students circled around them to keep adults from breaking up the fight. Somehow I managed to penetrate the circle and I found myself standing between the two fighting students. At a loss for what to say, I noticed that both of the youth were wearing bracelets that read “WWJD”. I knew that a group of youngsters from a Canadian church had recently visited, so I ascertained that these “What Would Jesus Do” bracelets had been given as gifts. I asked the two youth that before they continue with their fight that they just take a moment to reflect on their WWJD bracelets. “What would Jesus Do,” I asked. One of the young men took a good long time to think about it and then, ever so thoughtfully, he looked at me square in the eyes and said confidently “Jesus would beat him, man!” I love this story because it shows how the introduction of different culture and popular culture can not only have great uses, but great misuses as well.

On another trip to the beautiful Massai region of Kenya, I also encountered the powerful connections between the globalization of popular culture and education. Here I found myself amongst dire poverty, in the midst of a drought which had taken the lives of many and depleted the livestock population. Everywhere I turned, I was made aware of the human costs of abject poverty, while also being consistently uplifted by the powerful spirit of the Massai community even during such difficult times. One day I was walking to visit my friends in a local village and I happened to look high up into the horizon where I witnessed a strange sight. There, in the distance, were a dozen runners dressed in the most beautiful training outfits and brand new, top-of-the-line sneakers. I came to find out that several years prior, a powerful American clothing company had visited the Massai region in hopes of recruiting new talented athletes. The runners I saw that day spent their training months in the high altitude of Kenya and were then brought to the US during competitive racing season. As I made my way to my destination that day, I came across a village poorer than any other I had seen on my trip. Women had to literally walk for 5
miles each day in order to carry clean water to the village. Kids were not able to attend school because the families needed them to help forage for whatever scraps of food and firewood they may be able to find. Everywhere, families recounted stories of family members who had recently died due to the drought. Yet the peculiar fact was that every household, households without enough food and water, had plenty of brand new Nike clothing, and walking through the village I felt like I was taking a stroll through Olympic Park. When asked who they wanted to be like when they grew up, kid after kid in a village with no television and only rare contact with newspapers knew that they wanted to be like Michael Jordan and other NBA greats.

On my walk back to the village where I was staying, I noticed the stark contrast in clothing. Here I encountered a more familiar sight from my travels to different areas of the world. The folks in this village wore a mix of traditional Massai clothes and a variety of other clothes that had been donated from the western world. One mother wore a t-shirt with a picture of the American icon Barbie Doll. When I asked her about it, she thought that the picture on her shirt was of a real American woman and she told me that she thought the woman was beautiful. “I tell my daughter that if she can look just like the woman in this picture, that she will be successful and marry well,” she told me. A young boy was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of a fist with the middle finger sticking straight up. When asked if he knew that he was wearing a shirt whose message was a swear, he was astonished and responded “I am just grateful to have a clean shirt to wear, in my mind the hand on the shirt is the hand of the person who reached out across the world to provide me with this clothing.” Still another young boy was wearing a shirt with a picture of the Three Stooges. When I asked him if he knew who they were, he made a “3 Stooges noise” and gestured in a 3 Stooges manner that he was going to poke my eyes out, and then he laughed and laughed. “How do you know about the 3 Stooges,” I asked, knowing that he had never seen them on television. He told me that a Peace Corps volunteer had spent many evenings recounting the antics of the 3 Stooges and that now everyone in the village was familiar with their comedy. But what is equally telling is that one of the local teachers had come to see the 3 Stooges as a symbol for American behavior, and when teaching about Americans in her Social Studies course she would often refer to the Stooges as a point of reference.

In our ever-globalizing world the movement of culture happens almost as rapidly and seemingly undetectably as the passing of money through the wired world of investment banking. But with each contact, an effect is being felt and the current trend is an increasing Americanization of the popular culture of societies around the world. Equally important, of course, is the corresponding values that are transmitted. As Americanization sinks its hooks into even the
most remote areas of the world, the goals of materialism and consumerism are never far behind. Curriculum often follows, in turn, to teach the values and lessons necessary to compete and survive in a world that puts markets and material wealth at the forefront of what is important and worth achieving. The advent of the internet brings many rewards, including the ability to communicate with people around the world. The increasing accessibility of such technologies, however, also “flood the local market” with new ideas about culture, new icons to worship, new thoughts on beauty, and new values about what is important and what makes for success. Globalization paves the road and makes way for American and Western values to travel everywhere and this is having a powerful and poignant effect on schools and curriculum. In one school I visited in Lesotho, a very small and poor country in southern Africa, the only textbooks available to the students were textbooks that had been used in the American curriculum during the early 1980s. Kids in Lesotho were being brought up with an American idea of world and modern history, and coming to know even themselves through this lens.

This book provides a thoughtful examination of some of the many uses and abuses of popular culture in Education. Thoughtful arguments are presented outlining the pedagogical uses of teaching through popular culture, of utilizing popular culture as a mirror of society and understanding that the values and norms of our popular culture are usually a reflection of or frontrunner to American, and thus global, values. Having had the opportunity to participate in the Popular Culture and Education panels at the American Popular Culture Association’s annual conference over the past decade, I am excited to be introducing this interesting and thought-provoking volume. I have heard dozens of papers on the topic, on panels overseen by Professor Leventman and guided by his vision, that have inspired me to understand the power of popular culture in my own classroom. No longer is popular culture isolated in a vacuum. In this age of globalization, American popular culture plays in the imaginations of people around the world, spreading American ideals of individualism, materialism, commodification, imperialism, militarism, and America’s versions of democracy and history. The authors in this book provide great insight into the ups and downs of this process, and offer interesting ideas about utilizing popular culture in positive and educational ways. I am sure that readers will take with them, as have I, many valuable lessons and deeper understandings of the role of popular culture in our collective education.

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PART I. POPULAR CULTURE IN HISTORIC PERSPECTIVE
INTRODUCTION TO POP CULTURE HISTORY

Popular Culture is itself a product of history and once created develops its own history. In pre-modern Western history, popular culture, as we know it, did not exist. Instead, there was folk culture, a product closely tied to everyday life and basic human issues and experiences. Only when publics and masses emerged did human experience become commercialized commodities. Life was then experienced and expressed in manufactured products rather than through innocent life events. Because of its abstract, artistic nature, music is particularly susceptible to differing, even contrasting ideological meanings and cultural interpretations. As history moves on, especially in capitalist societies as in the United States, cultural items become ever more popularized and commodified. The resulting mass production and distribution are not just of art itself but of its creators and performers, who as icons of culture, ultimately become its high priests, i.e., celebrities. In a kind of massive cultural absorption, eventually all aspects of life become popularized. So, the relatively rarified life of the intellectual as well as popular expressions such as movies, enter American mass consciousness. People come to feel, think, fantasize even dream in popular culture terms.
When I entered the college composition classroom as a graduate teaching assistant eager to teach college freshman, I was anxious about my qualifications to be teaching college students and about my ability to teach well. What I had not anticipated was a classroom replete with students who were intellectually complacent and apathetic. This proved to be my greatest hurdle as a teacher. Each semester I labored to engage students with material they might find interesting, but their apathy toward education and learning seemed deeply ingrained. I endeavored, then, to discover what might account for their attitudes and actions. My research exposed me to an extensive discourse concerning what many consider a disturbing feature of American culture—a deeply-rooted anti-intellectualism. Recognizing the influence of this cultural anti-intellectualism on students, I strove to understand it more fully and to investigate ways to confront it in the college composition classroom. Ultimately, this became the focus of my master’s thesis: “The Gump Slump: Challenging Anti-intellectualism in the College Composition Classroom.”

After extensive research on anti-intellectualism in American culture, I decided simply to teach students about anti-intellectualism in an effort to help them recognize and understand its presence and prevalence in their lives. Consequently, I designed a unit on anti-intellectualism for the first-year composition class. My goals in designing this unit were 1) to discover and discuss students’ understanding of intellectualism and their attitudes toward it; 2) to introduce them to the history of anti-intellectualism in American culture; 3) to help them see its pervasiveness in their lives, especially through popular culture media; 4) to have them analyze an artifact of popular culture to discover the message(s) sent regarding intellectualism; and 5) to present them with materials and assignments that challenged them intellectually. Based on my experience teaching variations of this unit over the course of three years, I contend that students and teachers can benefit from making anti-intellectualism a unit of study in the college composition classroom.
The existence of anti-intellectualism in American society has been most notably recorded by American historian Richard Hofstadter in his 1963 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. In it he argues that America has been anti-intellectual from its birth. His discussion looks historically at the social conditions and movements in American culture that have contributed to the nation’s anti-intellectual mentality. Intellectualism, as Hofstadter defines it, is not synonymous with intelligence: “Intellect […] is the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind. Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines.”¹ In short, intellect begins with intelligence, but moves beyond it to pursue a deeper analysis and a more critical evaluation. He defines *anti*-intellectualism, then, as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life.”² He notes that though our country on the whole supports the pursuit of intelligence, it fears, mocks, and resents intellect.

According to Hofstadter, the persistence of anti-intellectualism in America has not resulted from an increased resentment of intellectualism, but from a continuing ambivalence toward it. He claims it has its roots in religion because religion praises wisdom from the heart, not the mind. Also, politics has contributed to its endurance as Americans have often found greater comfort in electing leaders with practical knowledge and have been skeptical of intellectual candidates—fearing the “curiosity of the active mind as too trivial and ridiculous for important affairs.”³ He further argues that deeply embedded in American religion and politics, anti-intellectualism also influenced people’s work lives as business became the focus of American life. Business has relied more on experience and practical knowledge, whereas intellectualism lies in more contemplative thinking and analysis.⁴ Finally, Hofstadter discusses the influence of anti-intellectualism on the educational system, highlighting the perpetual debate over the purpose of education: to develop the mind or prepare students for “the duties of life.”⁵ In sum, Hofstadter argues that in America, intellect is “resented as a form of power and privilege”⁶ and as hostile to emotion, “character,” “practicality” and democracy—all of which our society values.⁷

Since Hofstadter’s book appeared in 1963, numerous educators and culture critics have continued to address this and related topics—revealing an ongoing concern about anti-intellectualism in American culture. Unfortunately, despite continuing concern, compositionists have not yet directly confronted the issue in the classroom. A survey of our field’s two major journals, *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*, over the last twenty years reveals a concentration, instead, on kindred topics: literacy and critical thinking.
Contemporary conversations about anti-intellectualism have focused upon three major themes—the definition of an intellectual curriculum, the death of the public intellectual, and popular culture’s effects on intellectualism. Though my research explored the significance of all three themes, I focused my unit for the freshman composition classroom on the third of these—popular culture’s influence on intellectualism in American culture. I did so because I believe strongly (as do many other academics) that popular culture images of intellectualism directly affect students’ attitudes and behavior. I describe now the unit on anti-intellectualism as I taught it for three years. Certainly, the materials used for this unit (the essays taught and the popular culture artifacts examined) could vary.

I begin the unit in my classes by having students fill out a questionnaire designed to reveal their present attitudes about intellectualism. Students answer the questions anonymously during class prior to any class discussion so their responses can be as honest and untainted as possible. The questionnaire asks students to define intellectualism, evaluate the quality of their previous education, describe their personal attitudes toward intellect and education, assess society’s views of intellectualism, and examine popular culture’s portrayals of intellect.

Student responses reveal that most students associate intellect with intelligence—describing an intellectual as someone who is older, sophisticated, well-rounded and as someone who has extensive knowledge and is a thinker. Also, they quite often assume intellectualism is tied to social status or occupation, claiming, for example, all doctors, lawyers, and professors are intellectual. A majority of students state their high school curriculum did not challenge them intellectually and those who feel it did rest their argument on the fact that getting good grades was difficult and required much work. In response to the question asking students what they want to get out of their college education, not surprisingly, students cite a college degree, a good job or career, and essentially the possibility of making a lot of money. Some students have even admitted they do not know why they have gone to college. Student responses to the final question asking them to assess the portrayal of intellectualism in popular culture have been mixed—some claiming popular culture portrays intellect and intellectuals positively, some claiming the opposite. Part of what accounts for this discrepancy is how each student was then defining intellect.

Overall, the students’ responses to the questionnaire suggest they remain naive about the concept of intellectualism, have rarely (if ever) considered their view of intellectualism, and are unaware of the concept of anti-intellectualism and its prominence in American cultural life. Student responses to the initial questionnaire supported my original supposition: a majority of students come to
the college composition classroom with an unconscious anti-intellectual predisposition—impeding my efforts to engage them and challenge them intellectually. This evidence reinforces the need for addressing anti-intellectualism in the classroom.

To begin classroom discussion of anti-intellectualism, I have students read some of the most relevant commentary. Of course, I start by introducing students to Richard Hofstadter’s work. *The Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* published a speech Hofstadter gave in 1953 titled “Democracy and Anti-intellectualism.” It provides a condensed version of what he would later greatly expand into his 1963 book. In it, he provides an extensive definition of intellectualism and describes what has historically contributed to the development of anti-intellectualism in America.

After we have spent substantial time discussing the history of anti-intellectualism in America via Hofstadter’s work, I have students read more recent articles discussing how anti-intellectualism plays out in modern society—specifically in American popular culture, politics, and education. Following are some of the articles I have included in the unit.

Phillip Lopate—novelist, film critic, and professor of English literature—argues in “The Last Taboo” that anti-intellectualism has become especially prevalent in movies. Two of the films Lopate criticizes in some detail include *Forrest Gump* and *IQ*. According to him, *Forrest Gump*, which received the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture in 1994, shows the success and triumph of a “hapless moron” based on his attitude and luck rather than intelligence or intellectual actions. Also, even though *IQ* centers on one of the most renowned thinkers of all time, Albert Einstein, the overall message of the movie is the importance of matters of the heart over matters of the mind. 9

Cynthia D. Long, in her 1996 *Academe* article, titled “It Came From Hollywood: Popular Culture Casts Professors in a Negative Light,” argues that movies and television shows portray educators as either “mistrustful and unethical,” “pompous and arrogant,” or “foolish” and “out of touch,” and consequently foster anti-intellectual sentiments among viewers. Long cites the films *The Nutty Professor*, *With Honors*, and *Quiz Show* among her examples. 10 Notably, the negative portrayal of education and educators has been well recognized by many other academics and culture critics in recent years.

In addition to reading articles discussing popular culture’s influence on current anti-intellectual sentiments, students read an article discussing anti-intellectualism in modern politics. Media critic Todd Gitlin published an article in *The Chronicle Review* after the 2000 presidential election, titled “The Renaissance of Anti-Intellectualism.” In it, Gitlin credits George W. Bush with “resurrecting—though probably not intentionally—the subject of anti-intellectualism.” 11 Though he acknowledges that both the Gore and Bush
campaigns showed elements of “suspicion of intellectuals and intellectuality,” he notes it was much more obvious with Bush.12 As Gitlin points out, Bush not only misspoke quite often in his run for the presidency, but also appeared to be unable to reason, demonstrated by his struggle to answer questions to which he had not rehearsed an answer. Despite the pundits’ criticism of George W. for these faults, Bush supporters found comfort in the idea that Bush would hire an intellectual staff, thereby, according to Gitlin, “certifying that intelligence was something for underlings.”13 Gore, on the other hand, was often pegged as the more intellectual, stiff candidate, labeled in the media as “too smart for his own good,” and thus allowing Bush to come across as the “common man.”14

One of the most contemporary discussions of anti-intellectualism and its presence in education is by Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia. In his 1997 Harper’s article, “On the Uses of Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students,” he attributes the passivity of students to their consumerist attitudes about education—placing the importance on acquiring a degree, not attaining knowledge or pursuing intellectual development. He argues that what inhibits these goals, and essentially the curriculum, is that universities market themselves in order to appeal to students and parents most often by promoting their nonacademic attributes. As a result, the curriculum, the students themselves, and the universities as a whole are severely compromised in their intellectual mission.15

These readings have often served as the foundation for our class discussions about anti-intellectualism, though I have used a number of other articles over the years.

The writing assignment I have assigned most often for this unit requires students to compose a four to five-page argumentative essay in which they present a detailed analysis of a popular culture artifact of their choice (a television show, movie, advertisement, song, magazine, music video, etc.). Based on what they have learned from the readings and class discussions, they are to analyze the message their artifact sends about intellectualism (using Hofstadter’s definition of intellectualism) by discussing in detail any of the following: its representation of intellectuals and non-intellectuals; its representation of education, educators, and students; and its representation of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. To assist students with this assignment, I first model this process in class by screening a television show, film, or excerpts from a combination and discuss the message the program or programs send regarding intellectualism. At present, I have used the movies Forrest Gump, With Honors, and IQ and episodes from Friends, Frasier, The Simpsons and Boston Public, though a number of other films and television shows could be equally effective. Some semesters I have expanded this assignment to a
more lengthy research paper, requiring students to conduct and incorporate secondary sources into their analysis of the cultural artifact or multiple artifacts.

I provide now a brief summary of one of our class discussions about the representation of intellectualism in a popular television series well-known to all my students at the time—*Friends*. As a class we viewed an episode from the Fall 2000 season. This particular episode involves three main subplots: Monica and Chandler are beginning to plan their wedding and have some troubles, Joey finds a smutty book in Rachel’s bed and confronts her about it, and Phoebe moves into Ross’s apartment. Before we begin our discussion of the message this episode sends regarding intellectualism, we discuss each of the characters. Students identify Ross as the most intellectual character based on his occupation as a paleontologist and a professor. They consider Monica and Chandler intelligent and Phoebe and Joey “airheads.” We focus much of our discussion, then, on Ross, the supposed intellectual.

An early scene in this episode opens with Ross lecturing his students at a university. The first thing the television audience hears is his concluding words, “and that should conclusively prove that I had the idea for *Jurassic Park* first.” This line, of course, reinforces the widely-held idea that students learn useless information in college and that professors are arrogant and foolish. When Phoebe interrupts the class to ask Ross if she can move in with him for awhile, he tells the class to ask each other their hometowns to keep them busy. Here, he comes across dorky and socially inadequate. Later in the show, Ross finds Phoebe giving a massage to one of her clients in his apartment. When Phoebe asks why this bothers him so much, he says he likes to come home and “relax and kick back with a puzzle...beer...cold beer.” He corrects himself in an effort to appear more social and hip, though his relaxation with a puzzle fits the stereotype of a nerdy “intellectual.” In addition to this, Ross later pretends to be a masseur when a beautiful woman comes to the door, but unexpectedly ends up giving a massage to her father. This scene, like many in other episodes, shows how Ross is unsuccessful with women, another characteristic associated with “nerds” or intelligent people. These three scenes serve as examples of how *Friends* portrays the person students classify as the most intellectual character as foolish, dorky, socially inept, and unsuccessful with women. After a thorough analysis of the representation of intellectualism and intelligence in this episode and in the show in general, I discuss with my students the significance of such representation. Because the characters on the show are young and attractive and persons many students aspire to be like, the negative portrayal of intellectualism and positive portrayal of anti-intellectual beliefs and behaviors powerfully reinforces an existing anti-intellectual mentality in American culture. We discuss, also, the significance of the pervasiveness of such portrayals as we struggle to name television shows or films that counter these representations.
As the unit comes to a close, I have students fill out a follow-up questionnaire that asks them to reflect on their thoughts about intellectualism based on what they learned throughout the unit. The first question on the survey asks students whether or not they aspire to become an intellectual, based on their new understanding of the term. By far, a majority of students have expressed some interest in becoming an intellectual, though a few have professed they already are intellectuals. The second question asks students to assess how they feel popular culture portrays intellectualism. Most have agreed that popular culture presents a negative portrayal of intellectualism. The third question I ask students is whether or not they now believe an anti-intellectual mentality exists in America. Almost all have stated they do and a majority have expressed some concern over this. The final question asks students whether or not they found the unit interesting and if so, what they have learned from it. A sampling of the responses include the following: “I found this unit to be challenging”; “I did enjoy this unit b/c [sic] it deals with a topic that should be watched by everyone so it does not get out of hand”; “I enjoyed it b/c [sic] it does allow us to actually see and understand intellectualism differently”; and “I never really thought about how TV portrays intellectualism before. This unit really opened [sic] my eyes.”

Based on my students’ responses, I conclude that a majority of my students have benefited from an exploration of the concept of anti-intellectualism and its role in their lives. Though this unit has not instantly turned my students into intellectuals, and some students have been resistant to it, it has helped to open some of their minds to challenging anti-intellectualism instead of passively succumbing it. Of course, my study has involved a relatively small number of students—around two hundred and fifty—most of whom are white, lower-middle or middle class, and from small Midwestern towns. Nonetheless, helping students understand American anti-intellectualism and its pervasive influence in their lives (especially through popular culture) and aiding them in addressing it in their own lives makes this an attractive option as a unit of study in the writing classroom. The resources I discuss and the unit I describe do not constitute the only means of incorporating a unit on anti-intellectualism into the writing classroom.

As Hofstadter and many before and after him have noted, anti-intellectualism exists and persists in American society, directly influencing the beliefs and actions of students. Often unaware of its existence, young people find no refuge from it when they encounter media products that both reflect and reinforce this mentality. Though some young people may escape the effects of American anti-intellectualism through the influence of their parents or friends, or through an innate desire to learn, a great majority will not escape, but will instead become adults who embrace and perpetuate such thinking. Confronting
and challenging anti-intellectualism in the college composition classroom can aid in cultivating an atmosphere conducive to intellectual development and can enrich students’ university experience and their lives.

End Notes

2 Ibid., p 7.
3 Ibid., pp. 146-47.
4 Ibid., p. 236.
5 Ibid., pp. 329-32.
6 Ibid., p. 34.
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12 Ibid.
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**IN THE EYE OF THE STORM: CONTROVERSIES AND AMERICANIZATION OF HOLOCAUST FILMS**

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**Introduction**

Over the past half century, film has allowed us to revisit vicariously the deeds, the sites, and the participants of the Holocaust. The medium has given us access to not only the historical events of the Holocaust, but to the psychology and behavior of both victim and victimizer. With its graphic power, film stands as a cultural socio-political witness to the values of the period which the works depict. While films during the Third Reich were used to manipulate and propagandize, today we see the power of film to move, educate, and provoke critical thinking. When educators and other professionals use these films there is the responsibility of understanding the importance of the graphic image as well as the significance of the historical, political, and social context in which the film was made.

Films representing the Holocaust have often been considered incapable of capturing the tragedy of the loss of six million Jews and five million non-Jews. However, aside from the survivors’ experiences, communicated through oral and written media, films may be the closest the public can come to grasping this Twentieth Century blight on the collective human conscience.

We have selected a series of films since the onslaught of World War II and the Holocaust that illustrates diverse controversies, some major and some minor, that have surfaced over the past few decades. The academic discussions, heated debates or passionate objections surrounding the films illustrated here have forced viewers and readers to consider several sides of an issue. Involved in the debate are film critics, Holocaust survivors, and the general public, all bringing their personal experiences and psychological analyses to the viewing of the specific work. As their criterion for judging these works, all parties have argued from the point of sensitivity to a sacred subject as the Holocaust, citing the tension that exists between a horrifying human tragedy and the Americanization, distortion, de-Judification, commercialization, as well as the internationalizing and fictionalizing of the subject matter.
Chaplin’s The Great Dictator: A Comic Prelude to War

Our narrative begins with a pre-World War II tragi-comic film, Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator, filmed in 1939 and released in 1940. Here Chaplin plays a spirited Jewish barber who is confused with his look-alike Adenoid Hynkle. In a post-Krystallnacht period, Chaplin as director pokes fun at fascism, at a time when this political phenomenon was destroying the Jews and being viewed as a threatening cancer in Europe. Despite this satire, some of the US government officials and American Jewish Hollywood moguls felt that Chaplin’s timing was off. On the one hand, we were not yet at war with Germany, and the European market for this film could be damaged. Furthermore, the majority of critics felt that the humorous satire of the personality mix-up of the little Jewish barber and the fascist leader was unfortunately overshadowed by the actor’s passionate plea for peace in the finale of the film, which was seen as preachy and out of place. The New York Daily News said Chaplin “pointed a finger of Communism at the audience.”

During the filming of The Great Dictator Chaplin was receiving alarming messages from United Artists that the Hays Office which handled the movie moral ratings would put some stumbling blocks in front of Chaplin by way of censorship. Many crank calls also unsettled Chaplin, no doubt from pro-Nazis, since we were not yet at war with Germany. Chaplin said in his memoirs that if he had been aware of the bestial murders and tortures that went on in the Nazi concentration camps, he would not have been “so polite” toward depicting the Nazis.

After the release of the film, a New York viewer asked Chaplin why he was so anti-Nazi. Chaplin replied because they were so anti-people. “Of course,” Chaplin recounts, the man said “You’re a Jew, aren’t you?” Chaplin’s retort: “One doesn’t have to be a Jew to be anti-Nazi. All one has to be is a normal decent human being.” The discussion ended.

The Catholic Church entered the fray by not recommending this film for children. The movie rating reads: “Unrelated to plot or characterization, Chaplin utters a seemingly gratuitous and personal remark, suggesting his disbelief in God. In view of the star’s following, this utterance in its possible harmful effect on audiences is deplored.”

Herman Weinberg in reviewing the film objects to the objection, saying “why didn’t the Legion of Decency condemn the Nazi justification of invading Poland in Feldzug in Polen, which played in the German quarter of New York for two months to packed and cheering houses.” Weinberg concludes his review: “In the Talmud it is written that there are things on earth which make even the angels in Heaven weep.”

Chaplin also had a meeting with Pres. Roosevelt over the film. Roosevelt told the director, “Sit down, Charlie; your picture is giving us a lot of trouble in
the Argentine.” Then the President went on to serve him several martinis, which Chaplin tossed down quickly from shyness, he recalls. As a friend later said to Chaplin about this incident, “You were received at the White House, but not embraced.” Reeling from the martinis, Chaplin had to address sixty million Americans over the radio with the pacifist speech from the film. Sobered up, he did a fine job of pulling himself together with his passionate plea for peace....His words were from the heart, but hardly heeded as the US entered the war soon afterwards.

**Alain Resnais’s *Night And Fog (1955): An Examination Of Conscience***

In 1955, Resnais filmed this documentary at Auschwitz and Majdanek. From the present-day images of a deserted landscape of the Auschwitz/Birkenau death camp, the director flashes back to the rise of Fascism in 1933. His short 25-min. film is a perfect microcosm of the Holocaust from the psychology of the Nazis at Hitler’s coming to power to the judgments at Nuremberg in 1946. This early film, produced within a decade after the Holocaust, has always been the most popular film shown in classrooms and at conferences. It was hailed as a sensitive (almost clinical) presentation of the major events of the genocide. On one hand, the film was challenged by some educators who felt that the graphic violence, especially at the conclusion of the film with the plows moving the thousands of bodies into mass graves, should have no place in the classroom. More recently, some Jewish educators at the Holocaust Museum and at Facing History and Ourselves have stated that the film does an injustice to a correct depiction of the Holocaust, since nowhere in the film is the word “Jew” mentioned. This, they contend, diminishes the notion that it was a specific genocide aimed at the Jewish community.

Several responses to these criticisms are in order. Resnais’ purpose in the film is to show man’s inhumanity to man. He universalizes the Evil of the Nazis, and shows at the conclusion of the film that everyone in the Nazi chain of command stated vociferously that they were not guilty. They were just following orders. Jean Cayrol, the poet and source of the script, inquires, “Then who is guilty?”

Secondly, Resnais made the film at a time when very few people, in Europe or America, wished to confront the Holocaust. Americans wanted to get back to their lives following a four-year war, filled with many sacrifices. Europeans could not avoid the face of the Holocaust in the victims who were trying to resettle, and with great difficulties. The director did a praise-worthy job of bringing to the screen a non-commercial film that was accusatory of the German
Nazis. The French, however, objected to the film and censored it at the time of its screening at the Cannes Film Festival, obliging Resnais to remove the image of a Frenchman guarding the internment camp of Pithiviers. It hinted at collaboration.

Lastly, it would be difficult not to see that the Jews were the targets of Nazi oppression. The stars of David, names on the luggage, passports with Jewish inscriptions, among other indications, all point to the fact, that the Jewish community was indeed the primary victim.

Joshua Hirsch in *After image: Film, Trauma and the Holocaust*, sums up the essence of the controversy:

Thus *Night and Fog* intervened into French, and ultimately the global, discourse on the Holocaust in three ways. At the level of content, it both combated the repression of the memory of the camps and contributed to the repression of the memory of the Jewish genocide. But at the same time, it contributed to a new discourse of historical trauma through the content of its form.7

The objections to the film may appear valid today, but a half-century ago the film must be viewed as a pioneering work which brought the Holocaust to international consciousness.

**Wertmueller’s *Seven Beauties* (1975): Tragedy As Comedy**

In 1975, the iconoclast Lina Wertmueller produced *Seven Beauties (Pasqualino Settebellezze)*. It is the picaresque story of Pasqualino, a degenerate Neapolitan played by Giancarlo Gianini, which can be interpreted as a controversial allegory or parable about what one must do to survive.

The film opens with a montage of images of Hitler and Mussolini accompanied by a tongue-in-cheek song with the sarcastic refrain, “Oh, Yeah.” Pasqualino is a sexual predator and murderer who eventually becomes a bystander during the Holocaust, chancing upon a Nazi massacre of Jewish victims. Francesco, his accomplice, recognizes their complicity and silence in the crime and confesses, “We’re the allies of the dregs of humanity.”

Wertmueller satirizes a Nazi woman commandant, a vicious character with whom Pasqualino has sex in order to survive. However, he is obliged to face the consequences--he must now kill several of his barracks-mates. The Nazi woman is based on Ilsa Koch, “The Bitch of Buchenwald,” wife of Commandant Karl Koch.

Jerry Kosinski (author of *The Painted Bird*) believes that Wertmueller should shift her view of collective responsibility of the Nazis in the film to a more personal one, for Wertmueller inquires through her work, “How did the world get like this?” instead of placing moral responsibility on individuals, be
they Nazis or the immoral/amoral Pasqualino. His review is aptly titled, “Seven Beauties: A Cartoon Trying to be Tragedy.”

Well known survivor of Buchenwald and writer Bruno Bettelheim, considers the film dangerous and questionable entertainment. He feels that the director neutralizes the horror of the camps and presents her protagonist as someone who is self-justified because he survives. Bettelheim says that Pasqualino degrades the notion of survivor. Other critics of Lina Wertmuller also feel that in Seven Beauties she betrays the ennobled nature of a survivor. She, on the other hand, considers satire as healthy, as she plunges deep into the psyche of a human being trying to survive, making difficult ethical decisions.

The NBC Holocaust Miniseries (1978)

After weeks of publicity by Jewish organizations before the April 1978 broadcast of Holocaust, based on Gerald Green’s work, there was great excitement in the air. This viewing of the many events of the Holocaust in the lives of two fictional families, one Jewish and one Nazi, opened the eyes of many Americans to a tragedy they tried to forget. The PR campaign to get Jews and Christians to watch the program was significant. The ADL and other groups prepared separate literature, diverse study guides. On one hand, the material for Christians was sensitive as not to hurt their feelings but to educate them to issues of the Holocaust. Some magazines like Moment targeted the Jews. Peter Novick in The Holocaust in American Life, comments, “For Jews (watching the program) has about it the quality of a religious obligation.” In literature to the Jewish community, the material was more straight-forward, critical of Christian anti-Semitism and Eastern European collaborators. Novick mentions that the literature also carried disparaging references to the assimilation of Jews who inter-married with gentiles in the miniseries.

Although praised by Christians and Jews, as well as public and critics alike, for the deeply moving and dramatic exposure of the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust to some say 120 million people, Elie Wiesel’s article in the New York Times on the day of the broadcast, entitled “Trivializing the Holocaust” denounced the miniseries. “Untrue, offensive, cheap...an insult to those who perished and to those who survived. It transforms an ontological event into soap-opera....The Holocaust (is) the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted. Only those who were there know what it was; the others will never know.” These harsh critical words reflect the beliefs of a survivor wounded by the commercialization of the Holocaust. The true value of the pioneering miniseries, however, was only realized later on. For those who were exposed for the first time to the horrors of the Shoah, this was indeed an enlightening experience.