In Search Of Popular Culture: This field's ad-hoc approach draws flak ...
By Lydia Chavez
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 8, 1989;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index
pg. EDUC24

THE 60's LEGACY

In Search Of Popular Culture

By Lydia Chavez

This field's ad-hoc approach draws flak about its value and lack of methodology.

EVEN IN THE late 1960's, when relevance was a campus battle cry, Ray B. Browne's intellectual wanderings seemed radical. With a doctorate in American literature from the University of California at Los Angeles and a scholarly book on Herman Melville under his belt, he yearned to publish a journal on romance novels and rock music. His idea was that such slices of popular culture — anything excluded by folk and American studies' scholars as too contemporary — would revolutionize education. Like many other ideas that arose from the 60's, the quest became a grass-roots movement that continues to evolve.

By 1972 he had succeeded in founding not only The Journal of Popular Culture but also what is today a 3,000-member association of like-minded academicians and a fledgling department at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, 22 miles south of Toledo. It is here that popular culture is defined in the broadest sense possible — virtually anything goes. For literature, students of popular culture need only pore over books on the best-seller list. In film, they may choose to decipher the icons represented by Dirty Harry or Rambo or Rocky.

Skepticism Over the Merits

Clearly, the intellectual merits of this field make many academicians uncomfortable if not skeptical. Many balk at the idea of popular culture being a separate discipline on a par with English literature or American studies. They criticize the amorphous subject matter along with the absence of methodology, prominent scholars or an agreed-on body of knowledge necessary for undergraduate study.

Allan Bloom, a prominent critic and a professor at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, sees the popular-culture movement as part of the effort to delegitimize the classics. "It says that we don't have to measure the new against anything; that anything is good," said Mr. Bloom, author of "The Closing of the American Mind," a book that has already spawned at least one course on it. However, Mr. Bloom acknowledged that what is good, or at least acceptable, in education, has changed tremendously in the last 20 years.

While Bowling Green has perhaps the world's only department of popular culture, its singularity may say as much about the degree of change in academia as it says about the controversy buffeting popular culture and its aspirations. Today many mainstream academicians have incorporated courses on the contemporary scene into their curriculums. From Columbia University in New York City to the University of California at Berkeley, more than a million students take classes yearly on such diverse topics as mass culture, popular literature and modern architecture — as they do in England, Italy and elsewhere. In short, what was once scorned is now tolerated in more traditional academic venues.

Before popular culture, and its many permutations, could enter the ivory tower it first had to storm the barricades of the establishment and its watchdogs. In the early 1970's The American Quarterly, then a 20-year-old journal for American studies, had yet to publish a paper on rock music. The venerable, 87-year-old Modern Language Association had yet to examine popular fiction seriously, according to Mr. Browne. By the mid-1970's the Modern Language Association had reorganized to include a section on popular culture. Several departments of American studies, including those at the universities of Minnesota and Iowa, have added a specialty in popular culture. "Academics recognize a growth industry when they see it," Mr. Browne said wryly.

Coinciding with these concessions, other forces helped fuel the popular-culture movement. Universities saw such topical offerings as a way to attract students interested in business careers, whose numbers were increasing, to the humanities. At the same time, the schools were confronting the whole "canon" question of what should constitute required reading for an undergraduate. Traditional fields also began to buy into the idea that pop culture — be it 1964 or 1664 — was important in understanding the Great Books or the historical and sociological developments of any era.

Popular vs. High Culture

"There is a flourishing of nontraditional programs that for a long time were regarded as popular trash," observed Michael Schudson, a visiting professor in media and politics at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. New research in a variety of disciplines "has brought into question the whole distinction between popular and high culture," he said.

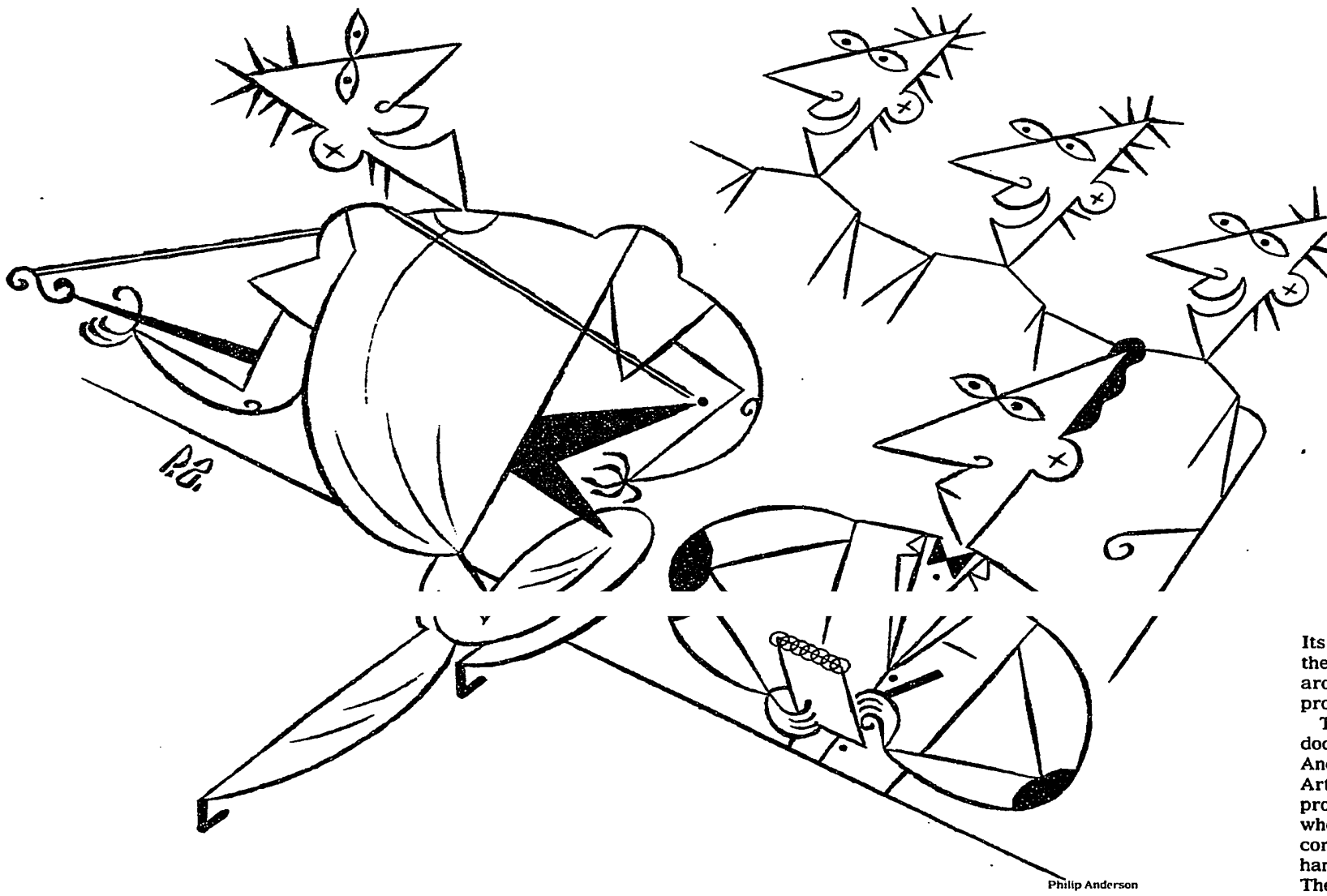
Michael Marsten, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Bowling Green and one of the first faculty members in popular culture, said the pop-culture field was a way of "attending to middle-class culture," which had largely been ignored by scholars. Nowadays, academicians in many field recognize its importance.

A proponent of this new historicism is Stephen Greenblatt, a professor of English Literature at the University of California at Berkeley and a specialist in 16th-century literature, who said the trend assumed that "there is a much more complicated relationship" between popular culture and what is now known as "elite culture." A student would benefit from knowing that Shakespeare had to write for an audience tempted by other entertainments such as public executions and bear-baiting, in which dogs tormented chained bears.

"It's fun and a pleasure to be aware of the popular culture and its relation to Shakespeare," Mr. Greenblatt said, "but it is also essential to understanding Shakespeare." The playwright's references to events like bear-baiting become more accessible, too.

Popular culture has also sparked new

Lydia Chavez is a former reporter for The Times.



Philip Anderson

currents in literary criticism. In the extreme, Mr. Schudson said, some literary and media critics argue that the most important element of any work is the audience: without it there is no text. Janice Radway's 1984 book "Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature" is considered a milestone. Her analysis of the romance-novel genre includes detailed interviews with women who read romance novels.

Centrists regard the genre as part of a continuum. Novels, from Judith Krantz's "Scruples" to the Harlequin Romance series, including such titles as "You Can Love a Stranger," are "part of a line of literary tradition going all the way back to 'Pride and Prejudice,' " explained Jan Cohn, dean of faculty at Trinity College in Hartford and the author of "Romance and the Erotics of Property," a study of mass-market fiction for women, published in 1988. "In a much less sophisticated way, they are sending the message to women of how to acquire power."

Although most traditional academicians are concerned with anything but current popular culture, some are more willing to accept the possibility that it may be important to study. "America is astonishing in its production of popular culture," said Mr. Greenblatt, whose own interest in such culture ends with the early 17th century. "Someone ought to be studying what this immense achievement is all about." What does it mean for the daily life and culture of Bali, he asked when its residents are watching reruns of "Dallas"?

While these directions please pop culturists like Mr. Browne, they have not translated into academic credibility for popular culture as a separate discipline. Even those who accept parts of the field shy away from wholehearted support. Phyliss Franklin, executive secretary of the Modern Language Association in New York City, pointed out that "not everyone who studies popular culture celebrates it."

LYNNE CHENEY, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, in Washington, echoed the sentiment of many: "What young people ought to be studying in school is what they aren't going to encounter in the ordinary course of life."

While Sondra Farganis, chairwoman of the social sciences at the New School for Social Research in New York City, supports the importance of popular culture as a course of study, she also believes it belongs in the sociology or history departments. Students could find "The Cosby Show" worth examining as an example of America's progression in race relations, argued Ms. Farganis, only if they are also aware of the civil rights movement.

"Looking at popular culture without a historical context would have no meaning for me," Ms. Farganis said. "Anyone interested in popular culture should be a sociology or history major to appreciate its context."

A wide gap still exists between popular culture and American Studies, although some departments in the discipline now offer several courses or a specialty in the field, according to John Stephens, director of the American Studies Association in Maryland. Essentially, American studies scholars focus more on the method of study: how American history and life should be looked at. Pop scholars concentrate more on the subject itself, adopting a laissez-faire approach to the process of philosophical inquiry, Mr. Stephens said.

American Studies, which developed in the 1930's in Ivy League schools, can also claim elitist roots, Mr. Stephens said. Popular culture remains a grass-roots movement, yet it has pushed the limits of academia, prodding the American Studies Association to broaden its outlook. A paper presented at a recent conference was "Madonna: TV and Music Video." "We would not have approved that 15 years ago," Mr. Stephens said.

Mr. Browne's very modus operandi — the insistent inclusion of the new — risks alienating other academicians. Bowling Green's decision to expand rather than consolidate expertise in the more acceptable cultural topics has also prevented it from shaping a solid core of courses for the undergraduate. Its graduate program, which is only at the master's degree stage, has not been around long enough to produce any prominent scholars.

The university is considering a doctorate in popular culture, but Andrew Kerek, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, agrees that problems exist. "It hasn't stabilized to where there is a consensus on what the core courses are," he said. "On the other hand there is a lot of substance to it. There are lingering questions about what popular culture is."

Some questions exist within the Association of Popular Culture, Mr. Browne's group, which meets annually to present papers. Some members believe that value judgments have no place in the field — that anything popular is worth studying to find out why. Others believe in the notion of limits. They ask: Should the value of romance novels be equated with the value of raisin commercials on TV.?

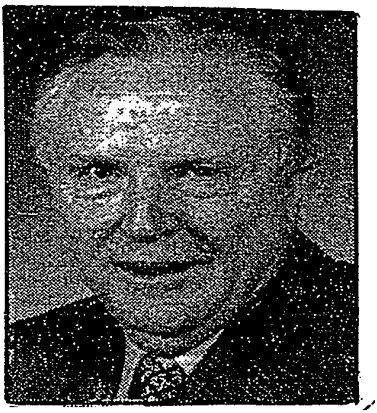
'The Age-Old Questions'

"There is a question whether people are studying comic books to get at a deeper meaning of life or because they are fun," observed Mr. Stephens, who believes that the credibility of the popular-culture scholar varies more widely than in other fields. "There is a continuing feeling that a lot of those who study popular culture aren't asking the age-old questions of humanities."

Conceding that there are difficulties associated with being in the forefront, Mr. Browne said undergraduates majoring in popular culture should be as aware of the popular culture of Dickens's and Shakespeare's day as they are of current popular culture. Finding faculty members with such depth, however, is problematic, he said. As it turns out, undergraduates studying for a degree in popular culture are often more interested in American popular culture today than in cross-cultural or historical comparisons, he noted.

In Bowling Green's undergrad courses, the main purpose of some of the lectures seems to be to spur

students to think. "The Popular Culture Reader," a text for the introductory course edited by Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar, is a collection of essays on popular myths, icons, stereotypes, heroes, rituals and formulas. Some of the issues addressed includes "The Higher Meaning of



Ray B. Browne

Marlboro Cigarettes," "The Malling of America" and "The Superbowl."

Recently, students in Beverly Block's section, "Popular Culture and the Media," were assigned to choose a rock figure, advertisement, book or recent film and talk about how it used icons, rituals, myths or formulas. Most of the four reports given one day last November were as general as the student who spoke about the singer Rod Stewart and his writing about "his feelings."

Only one student appeared to understand the connection. She chose as her topic the events involved in attending a Michael Jackson concert, including the buying of a Jackson tape and the playing of it to and from the concert. Fans also participated in a rite of unity and hero worship by wearing, like the entertainer, white socks and penny loafers. Michael Jackson's mass appeal resulted, in part, from his universal message of love and peace, the student concluded.

Afterward, Ms. Block seemed pleased by the student's dissection of the concert. "The point is to help them be critical about anything," she said.

Vida Penezic, who is studying for a doctorate in American culture with an emphasis on popular culture, also talked about "waking up" her undergraduate students so they might examine what "they are spending their time watching and reading."

Much as their students are, the professors seem more steeped in contemporary popular culture than in the historical overview. Mr. Nachbar, one of three full professors in popular culture at Bowling Green, has studied the history of Westerns and how they chronicle the development of attitudes about expansion. In the earliest Westerns, exploration and civilization of the Western frontiers were seen as a divine right, he said. Later, audiences were ready to accept the idea that greed and violent impulses may have motivated the

nation's expansion westward.

"Popular culture gives people what they want," Mr. Nachbar said, while elite culture must think about things in a new way. But trends in high culture can still be gleaned from the popular response. The singer Tracy Chapman's emphasis on social consciousness, for example, is unlike the music produced by her rock contemporaries. Does her popularity mean the end of the "Me Generation"? Mr. Nachbar said he was watching the situation closely.

If the undergraduate students taking popular culture seem unexceptional, many of the 15 graduate students at Bowling Green had a refreshing insistence on finding new ways to think about traditional subjects. Most enrolled at the school because of the freedom it allows.

Ruta Abolins, a graduate of the film school at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, wanted to write and critique films away from traditional methods. One of the films she is studying is "Big," which, she believes, had such wide appeal because the story is essentially about a woman making love to a child. In a traditional film department, her feminist bent might be tolerated, but not encouraged, she said.

Chris Wilhide, another graduate student with a degree in mass communications from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, in Baltimore, is doing an analysis of the mass media. "I wanted to be able to look at everything about the media, how it works and how to read it," she said.

Said Donald Callens, a professor of philosophy at Bowling Green, "The students in popular culture have a broader range of interests and are less narrow than those I get in other fields."

Bowling Green's graduate students have had little trouble finding work doing freelance writing or writing screenplays, and in places like advertising firms. Some have gone on to teach in departments interested in having a pop specialist. However, popular-culture enthusiasts wanting to pursue a career in academia are aware of the community's skepticism.

LIKE OTHERS with "popular" academic tastes, Peter Coogan, a 23-year-old graduate student who wants to be the world's foremost expert on comic books, plans to ground himself in traditional studies. After earning a master's degree in popular culture from Bowling Green, Mr. Coogan will study for a doctorate with an English department in American studies, then spend a couple of years in Wales studying the legend of King Arthur.

"That gets me back to legitimacy," Mr. Coogan explained, but his eyes lighted up when he added, "I can be the Samuel Johnson of comic books: They are really just another form of literature." ■