



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2010 Volume I: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Consumer Culture

Introduction

Consumer culture surrounds and infuses contemporary American life in ways that make its causes and effects appear blindingly obvious: materialism, status-display, waste, and so on. But as with so many cultural phenomena, the very obviousness or conspicuousness of consumerism in our lives can in fact blind us to the complex play of economic, social, and political forces that have actually shaped our modern "landscape of desire." Over the past several decades, an extraordinary outpouring of scholarship across the disciplines has inspired, indeed compelled, scholars to revise and deepen their understanding of consumer culture in this country.

As a result, a consumerist way-of-life that was once understood either as the artificial creation of the advertising industry or the organic product of individual dreams and desires in the free marketplace now looks far more complicated than that stark opposition between corporate manipulation and democratic aspiration would suggest. Far more complicated and far more interesting. The seminar that brought the authors of these marvelous curriculum units together was designed to provide some samples – a taster's menu so to speak – of this new generation of scholarship so as to see whether its insights might be translated into curricular recipes suitable for many different classroom kitchens.

The history of consumer culture is a very long one, stretching back centuries and over thousands of miles of sea-borne trade routes. Our seminar, though, focused on the last three-quarters of a century, from the Depression and World War II onward, when the political and economic architecture of an energy-intensive, highway-dominated, urban/suburban matrix was set into place. Drawing on work by historians, sociologists, ethnographers, economists, cultural studies scholars and a few short-story authors, we explored the impact of consumer culture on generational consciousness, citizenship and civil rights, race and ethnicity, children and family dynamics, and the environment. Since we all knew ourselves as consumers, whatever else we may fancy ourselves, no one felt excluded from the seminar conversation because of his or her specialization. For that reason, I suspect, our conversations were always lively, provocative, and productive – a hint, I believe, of how our students' own tacit sense of themselves as consumer citizens-in-training can provide a stimulus to discussion in virtually any classroom setting.

The proof of that hypothesis is in the pudding, as they say, so I invite the curious reader to look into the diverse offerings that follow, curriculum units that range from art and music to psychology, civics, statistics, language and culture. What you will find are not only compelling distillations of the ideas and approaches taken up in the seminar but, in keeping with the classroom mastery brought to the table by the Fellows themselves, an extraordinarily imaginative yet entirely practicable array of lesson plans and activities that translate those ideas and approaches into workable, teachable experiences. Unlike cooking, teaching cannot

be reduced to the "nuking" of microwaveable knowledge-nuggets; but curriculum units are, in their own way, a form of what intellectual historians call recipe-knowledge. And on that basis, I and the Fellows hope you will find something to your taste.

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