

Of the People, By the People, For the People:

In Defense of American Pop Culture, its Meaning, and its Impact

By

Avinash R. Chandan

A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of

Masters of History

Graduate Program in History

written under the direction of

Professor Thomas McCabe

and approved by

Newark, New Jersey

January 2013

©2013

Avinash R. Chandan

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Abstract of the Dissertation:
Of the People, By the People, For the People
By Avinash R. Chandan

Dissertation Director:
Thomas McCabe

American pop culture has often been subjected to scorn and ridicule, both at home and abroad, often by those who view it as being immoral or who view it as not being “true” culture. This begs the questions of what exactly are the characteristics of American pop culture, why did it develop along the lines it has, and what are its sociological implications. One can examine the issue by delving into American history, and tracing how American mainstream thought has informed cultural practice. The results of such a study show that the characteristics of American pop culture were directly shaped by the ideals expressed in the American Revolution, and that American pop culture has often been at the heart of a generations-long push towards greater social freedom.

Preface:

I'd like to thank and acknowledge the guidance of Professor Thomas McCabe for helping me throughout this process. I was in his class "Cities in Change" in summer 2011 when the idea for this paper began forming in my mind, partly inspired by readings that he had assigned to us in class.

I'd also like to dedicate this paper to my parents. Like so many other immigrants, they came to this country seeking the American Dream and a better life than the one they left. They have worked hard to put me through college. I hope that this paper will make them proud.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	Page 1
The Early Republic and the “Sacralization” of Culture.....	Page 11
The War on Football.....	Page 29
Comic Books on Trial.....	Page 37
Movies, Television, and the Internet.....	Page 56
Conclusion.....	Page 81
Bibliography.....	Page 87
Curriculum Vitae.....	Page 90

Introduction

American culture and pop culture are synonymous. And American pop culture holds a proven global appeal. But there are those in the United States and across the world who hold American pop culture in disdain. The complaints are never-ending, and are as ubiquitous as American pop culture itself. Many Americans have lamented that the pop culture of their own nation somehow degrades moral values, while some feel a sense of cultural cringe and long for a more European-style culture. Many Europeans, for their part, have sneered that American pop culture is crass and inauthentic. Many in the Third World have voiced hand-wringing worries that American pop culture will somehow corrupt their people. Nevertheless, American pop culture has widespread appeal, which leads one to ask some questions. Why does American pop culture have such a powerful appeal in the first place? And why do many elites and authority figures both in the USA and across the world fret about its effects?

To answer these questions, one must delve into the history of American pop culture. How did it evolve? What were the forces that went into defining it, setting it on the course that has led to today's culture? And why does it provoke such powerful reactions? The answers to these questions and, thus, to the larger questions above, lie in the history of America's founding. American culture was formed as a response, as a *reaction* against the aristocratic culture of imperial Britain during the 1700's. First of all, the settlement of the thirteen original colonies was done in large part not merely by those looking to make money in the New World (though those settlers certainly helped foster an entrepreneurial spirit in the

budding American colonies) but also significantly by those who tended to have some sort of dissatisfaction with life back in aristocratic Europe. The Roman Catholic settlers of Maryland, the Quakers of Pennsylvania and South Jersey, and the various exiles who had some political disagreement with the British Crown would be prime examples. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in his seminal work *Democracy in America*, asserts that the British-born majority of early American settlers—coming out of the strife of the English Civil War era—were “Born in a country which had been agitated for centuries by the struggles of faction, and in which all parties had been obliged to place themselves under the protection of the laws, their political education had been perfected in this rude school,” and thus had developed an intuitive sense of legalistic right and wrong; De Tocqueville concluded that “they were more conversant with the notions of right, and the principles of true freedom, than the greater part of their European contemporaries.”¹ And their descendants—while still British subjects—had come of age in a land populated largely by other families that had historic grievances with the gentrified culture back in the European motherland. Thus America was and still is a land of refugees.

And significantly, the thirteen colonies were unburdened by a local aristocracy of so-called lords and dukes, unlike their brethren back home in England. The eminent American Revolutionary historian Gordon Wood describes the social environment that this situation had taken shape by the 1770’s: colonial America was a place where “The absence of traditional European nobility...made everyone seem much more alike.” He notes that “The lack of the customary degrees of distinction and deference was what British visitors...meant

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, Esq. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 13.

when they said that ‘an idea of equality...seems generally to prevail, and the inferior order of people pay but little external respect to those who occupy superior stations.’”²

But the real blow against the aristocratic culture of the British Empire came during the American Revolution, a war that would not only give rise to the United States of America, but would also create the ideals that American culture would be based on, ideals that would allow a popular culture to flourish. This thesis paper contends that the political and social climate of the Revolutionary Era was essential in shaping the American ethos that would gradually lead to the pop culture that we know today.

Indeed, the later ratification of the Constitution would codify the lack of traditional nobility into law with a small but infinitesimally important piece of writing that is perhaps the most underappreciated passage of the United States Constitution, a clause at the end of Article I Section 9: *No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.*³ This would prove important, as it would codify the absence of nobility, preventing American culture from being burdened by the cumbersome obligation of deference to elites, a factor that would gradually prove more and more important in the evolution of American popular culture.

Much has been written about the American Revolution. Scholar Fred Anderson writes in his book *Crucible of War* that:

“On one hand (the left) ran the works of those scholars, descendants of the Progressive historians, who argued that the class interests of Americans stimulated both a movement

² Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 171.

³ *U.S. Constitution*, art. 1, sec. 9.

for independence and an internal struggle over the forms of government to be imposed in the new United States. For Neo-Progressive scholars, the Revolution was an intensely human process rooted in the experience of social inequity and in a democratic striving against privilege. Concerned as they were with colonial social relations and economic conditions, the Neo-Progressives focused less frequently on the great men of the Revolution than on ordinary people—farmers, artisans, laborers, women—and such dispossessed or marginalized groups as blacks, Indians, and the poor.”⁴

Anderson then describes the other major school of thought on the Revolution, writing that:

“Looking to the opposite side of the field, one could see arrayed the intellectual fortifications of those numerous historians, sometimes called Neo-Whigs, who believed that republican political ideas determined the allegiance and the actions of the Revolutionary generation. Their Revolution, while not bloodless, was most importantly an ideological and ironic one: ideological because it followed from the shared belief that powerful men had always sought, and would always seek, to deprive their fellow citizens of liberty and property; ironic because in the conservative act of defending their liberties and estates, the decidedly elitist gentlemen who articulated the Revolution’s ideals also liberated egalitarian impulses that would produce the most democratic, individualist, acquisitive society in the world.”⁵

In other words, once the ideals of freedom and the anti-aristocratic ideal of equality before the law were embraced by Americans, the seeds of future American culture were planted. And these seeds—consisting of a desire for greater freedom and a disdain for aristocracy—budded into the popular culture we know today.

This is a theme that is also picked up on by the scholar of sociology Paul Starr as well as by Gordon Wood. Paul Starr dives into the sociological process of how the Founding Era resulted in the birth of American culture in his fascinating history of American communications *The Creation of the Media*. Starr expounds the idea that:

“Constitutive choices are choices about how things are built and how they work—their design and rules of operation... Insofar as such choices emerge from slowly crystallizing cultural practices or gradual economic and political change, there may be no clear moments of decision. But at times constitutive choices come in bursts set off by social and political crises, technological innovation, or other triggering events, and at these

⁴ Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), xix.

⁵ Anderson, *Crucible of War*, xix.

pivotal moments the choices may be encoded in law, etched into technologies, or otherwise embedded in the structure of institutions.”⁶

And the American Revolution was just such an event. The constitutive choices that took place during the Revolution and during the decade in its aftermath (namely the process leading to the ratification of the Constitution; the Bill of Rights and early articles, particularly Article I, Section 9, were also constitutive choices that would prove fundamental to American culture) heavily shaped the mentality and social ideas of both the Americans participating in the Revolution and the upcoming generation that came of age during this seminal era. Gordon Wood writes in his fascinating volume *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* that:

“Of course, there have been many historians—Progressive or neo-Progressive historians, as they have been called—who have sought, as Hannah Arendt put it, ‘to interpret the American Revolution in the light of the French Revolution,’ and to look for the same kinds of internal violence, class conflict, and social deprivation that presumably lay behind the French Revolution and other modern revolutions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century these Progressive historians have formulated various social interpretations of the American Revolution essentially designed to show that the Revolution, in Carl Becker’s famous words, was not only about ‘home rule’ but also about ‘who was to rule at home.’”⁷

Wood further argues that the American Revolution should not just be limitedly interpreted as a reaction against specific actions of the British imperial government, but as a wide-ranging reaction against the societal mores of the British Empire itself. Wood contends that the American Revolution indeed resulted in radical changes to American society, and thus constituted a radical break away from the social mores of the British Empire, although in ways that were often quite dissimilar from other revolutions of the period. Wood notes that:

“It was as radical and social as any revolution in history, but it was radical and social in a very special eighteenth-century sense. No doubt many of the concerns and much of the

⁶ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 4.

⁷ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 3-4.

language of that pre-modern, pre-Marxian eighteenth century were almost entirely political. That was because most people in that very different distant world could not as yet conceive of society apart from government. The social distinctions and economic deprivations that we today think of as the consequence of class divisions, business exploitation...were in the eighteenth century usually thought to be caused by the abuses of government. Social honors, social distinctions, perquisites of office, business contracts, privileges and monopolies, even excessive property and wealth of various sorts—all social evils and social deprivations—in fact seemed to flow from connections to government, in the end from connections to monarchical authority. So that when Anglo-American radicals talked in what seems to be only political terms—purifying a corrupt constitution, eliminating courtiers, fighting off crown power, and, most important, becoming republicans—they nevertheless had a decidedly social message.”⁸

This was not just an economic protest against the mercantilistic British imperial system, but a reaction against the very social fabric and institutions of the British Empire’s thoroughly gentrified culture.

The American Revolution and the later ratification of the Constitution—constitutive choices in the mold of Paul Starr’s thesis—thus resulted in an ever-growing anti-elitist and anti-authoritarian ethos that would permeate the social fabric of the young republic and gradually result in the American culture that we know today. More specifically, the Revolution touched off a cultural process of transformation that took the original colonial culture and fired it off in a direction towards increasingly greater freedoms. According to Paul Starr:

“In overthrowing monarchy, the revolutionaries transformed this system of rank and subordination. Servitude among the white population virtually disappeared...Critics began to attack slavery—and while failing in the South, they succeeded after Independence in ending slavery in the North.”⁹

Indeed, Thomas Jefferson (who himself succumbed to a continued ownership of slaves in his later years once his financial troubles set in), James Madison, and others sensed that the institution of slavery was increasingly incompatible with the direction the country was going. Wood writes that Jefferson—despite his usual optimism—increasingly worried that

⁸ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 5.

⁹ Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 63.

the flaw of slavery, one of the last major institutions left over from the British Empire's rule of America, endangered the Union he and the other Founders had created, as did Madison.

Wood notes in his history of the early American republic, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, that:

“ He and his colleagues had created a Union devoted to liberty that contained an inner flaw that would nearly prove to be its undoing...Like Madison, many of the older generation came to realize that ‘slavery and farming are incompatible.’ The Civil War was the climax of a tragedy that had been preordained from the time of the Revolution.”¹⁰

Ultimately, it would fall to the generation of Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and Ulysses S. Grant to be the generation of Americans that would finally excise this last vestige of British imperialism from America's shores and allow the American Dream to progress, with all Americans included under its banner. Later, after Jim Crow ensnared the South following the end of Reconstruction, it would fall to later American generations—often with the aid of pop culture—to overthrow Jim Crow.

The constitutive choices fueled by the American Revolution and made during the ratification of the Constitution were vital for the creation of an American culture that celebrated freedom (which gave it the capability of gradually realizing the implication that men of color and women were also entitled to these rights), and quite importantly freedom of the speech and the press, which gave validation to the beliefs of common individuals and ultimately made it possible for a truly popular culture—centered by definition on the thoughts, desires, and feelings of the average man—to exist. Indeed, the legal enshrinement of free speech and freedom of the press as fundamental rights in the Constitution and their embrace in the popular social culture resulted in an American culture that, as Paul Starr

¹⁰ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 738.

argues, became much more open than European culture (indeed, one only has to look at France's ban on religious clothing and accessories in public—"approved 494-36"¹¹ in the French Parliament and later by the French Senate—to be reminded of Europe's lack of experience with anything quite like the First Amendment).

Starr writes that:

“Like the English and French revolutions, the American Revolution generated an eruption of public debate in print; the difference was the outcome. The pre-Revolutionary crisis in America established the press as the central venue of public discussion independent of the government, and the conflict and its immediate aftermath consolidated the status and rights of the press and the priority of open debate as a means of conducting politics in the new republic. None of the European dynastic states had previously experienced a comparable transformation, and notwithstanding the French Revolution, neither France nor the other principal nations of Europe would see such changes on a sustainable basis until well into the nineteenth century. It was the American Revolution that turned this page in human history.”¹²

This was not only part and parcel, but a vital core, of the emerging American popular culture. Common men could speak their mind, and with this freedom came the rise of a culture that catered to all Americans, the common man included, not just a few cultural and hierarchical elites. During the revolutionary era, the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* had a profound and groundbreaking impact on the future of American publishing, and Starr uses it as an example of how “The Revolution enlarged the public, and that enlarged public transformed politics.”¹³ Starr notes that writers previous to Thomas Paine had aimed for a narrow audience of upper-class gentry. Paine took a different approach by targeting a much more broad demographic. Starr also notes:

“*Common Sense* was revolutionary in its style as well as its content. The traditional assumption was that writing for a popular audience meant abandoning refinement for vulgarity, but Paine's style was neither vulgar nor refined. Relying on simple metaphors

¹¹ “French Ban on Religious Items Passes Test”, accessed September 10, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-02-10-french-scarf_x.htm .

¹² Starr, 71.

¹³ Starr, 67.

and referring to no literature except the Bible, he showed it was possible to discuss complex problems of government in language that was lucid and exciting.”¹⁴

To a great extent, all modern popular political writers on the Left, Right, or in the Center—from Chris Matthews to Charles Krauthammer—owe their genre to the legacy of Thomas Paine. But most importantly, Paine helped to pioneer the idea of putting appeals to the general public at the center of political discourse, and actually putting the idea into practice. The elites were no longer the primary audience of policy discussions. In the budding American republic, all free men—including the common men who made up the majority of the voting population—were to be included and appealed to.

As we will see, this anti-elitist attitude was predictably lamented by various elites and authorities within the United States who sought to tame the free-wheeling culture of America and yearned to subject the populace to a more European-style culture, which they viewed as being more orderly and more sufficiently deferential to elites. Simultaneously, American pop culture was subjected to similar disdain from European cultural and political authorities, who held similar views about the populist nature of American culture, and viewed it as something to be guarded against.

Ultimately, this paper will contend a two-pronged thesis: 1. That American pop culture has been a source of ever-increasing personal freedom and individualistic self-expression, and 2. That there have been certain elites and authorities, both within the United States and abroad, who have attempted to check against American pop culture, often ostensibly for the supposed good of the people, but in reality often for their own self interest. This paper will not argue that pop culture is *perfect*, because after all, *people* are imperfect. And indeed, many negative stereotypes still exist in the culture (as they do in every culture).

¹⁴ Starr, 68.

But this paper will argue that, despite whatever imperfections it may have, American pop culture has still embodied the American ethos of freedom—often at times when the government has failed to live up to that ethos—and been a driving force behind freedom’s expansion both at home and abroad, often merely by the act of pushing cultural boundaries.

Chapter 1: The Early Republic and the “Sacralization” of Culture

From the time of the Revolution, American culture developed further, guided by the egalitarian and freedom-loving ideals of the Revolution towards a more free-wheeling form. Signs of this could be read in the proverbial tea leaves upon the election of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency, or “the Jeffersonian Revolution,” as it is often termed. Of course this evolution was not always welcomed. Gordon Wood writes in *Empire of Liberty* that:

“For the Federalists the Republican victory in 1800 was bewildering. It was not just the loss of the presidency and the Congress that disturbed them; it was what Jefferson’s election represented socially and culturally that was so frightening. Since ‘the Degradation of our Nation and the corruption of the public mind & of the Morals of Individuals are constantly increasing,’ it seemed to Federalists like Christopher Gore of Massachusetts that the America they envisioned was coming to an end. Because the Federalists did not think of themselves as a party but rather as natural leaders who possessed superior social and cultural credentials, at first they did not think of the contest with the Republicans as one party against another. It was instead ‘a war of principles.’”¹

It seems that the principles of the Federalists, opposed as they were to the more aggressively republican ideals of Thomas Jefferson and his supporters, while supportive of the Revolution, indicated that they were not willing to progress much further down the road to freedom than the nation had already gone.

The Federalists “could not understand how so many uneducated and illiterate men were gaining elective office at the expense of men of talent and education.” Perhaps the anecdote from the Federalist side of the ongoing “war of principles” that most nakedly reveals the Federalist attitude was the horrified revulsion of Federalist Noah Webster (of dictionary fame) towards the republican masses. Lamenting the populist, actively vote-seeking tone that recent political campaigns had taken, Webster grumbled about their social implications. “What was most socially alarming about the new style of popular campaigning,

¹ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 303.

said Webster, was that it could make a ‘SOMEBODY’ out of a ‘MR. NOBODY.’”² The horror!

Nevertheless, the elite wing of the Federalist Party could no more stop the Jeffersonian slide towards greater freedom, egalitarianism, and openness than they could stop Jefferson’s election (which itself proved to be a constitutive choice in the mold of Paul Starr’s thesis).

“The Federalists’ world was dramatically changing, and they were understandably alarmed. Vulgarity seemed to be spreading everywhere, and in their minds upstarts and demagogues and Jacobins had taken over the reins of government. ‘We are sliding down into the mire of a democracy, which pollutes the morals of the citizens before it swallows up their liberties,’ wrote a deeply pessimistic Fisher Ames.”³

In response, many Federalists, particularly younger ones, began making efforts to formalize the political structures of the Federalist Party—which at that point was a party in name but not organization—and began earnestly courting public support.

“Of course, many other Federalists, especially old-school Federalists, resisted these efforts to become a party. They saw themselves as the wise, natural rulers of the society, and thus found it virtually impossible to conceive of themselves as an opposition party...The party organization in Massachusetts...remained strictly secret and designed only to carry out the decisions of its Boston leaders rather than mobilizing the statewide populace in the way the Republicans were doing.”⁴

But the key was already turned, the door was already open, and the American people were already moving:

“By the early decades of the nineteenth century Americans had come to realize that public opinion, ‘that invisible guardian of honour—that eagle-eyed spy on human actions—that inexorable judge of men and manners—that arbiter, whom tears cannot appease, nor ingenuity soften and from whose terrible decisions there is no appeal,’ had become ‘the vital principle’ underlying American government, society, and culture.”⁵

America continued developing as an increasingly open society. The increasingly public-oriented elections of the Jeffersonian Era (which would continue growing

² Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 304.

³ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 303.

⁴ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 306-307.

⁵ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 308.

dramatically during the later Jacksonian Era) were one sign, as was their ability to “make a ‘SOMEBODY’ out of a ‘MR. NOBODY.’”⁶ But arguably another was in the increasing cultural tendency of average Americans to want to go into business for themselves. As a result, a commercial, free marketeering culture that bubbled to the surface in America, which would turn out to be important to the rise and spread of American pop culture. Indeed, “English travelers were stunned to see Americans selling their landed estates in order to go into trade—the reverse of what Englishmen sought to do. There was more peddling and shopkeeping than existed anywhere else on the globe.”⁷ This entrepreneurial spirit, consumerism, and market-friendly environment would prove increasingly important in facilitating the growth of a populist, democratic culture that served the great mass of people rather than just the upper classes.

In any case, American culture gradually took on a form that was ever more centered on the tastes of ordinary people rather than just the upper classes. Indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that:

“The principle of equality, which makes men independent of each other, gives them a habit and a taste for following, in their private actions, no other guide than their own will. This complete independence, which they constantly enjoy in regard to their equals and in the intercourse of private life, tends to make them look upon all authority with a jealous eye, and speedily suggests to them the notion and the love of political freedom. Men living at such times have a natural bias to free institutions.”⁸

De Tocqueville immediately discusses the implications this has for political institutions, but he uses this passage—at the opening of Book 4, Chapter 1 of *Democracy in America*—to begin his book on how freedom affects culture.

⁶ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 304.

⁷ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 326.

⁸ De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 659.

By the mid-nineteenth century, America had developed a shared popular culture that was largely free of the artificial division between “high” and “low” culture that is so often invoked today by those who wish to show disdain for some aspect of popular culture. Professor Lawrence W. Levine writes about this lack of division in his fascinating book “Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America” and uses the widespread popularity of Shakespearean plays as an example. Levine asserts that “The place of Shakespearean drama in the nineteenth century American theater should make it clear how difficult it is to draw arbitrary lines,” between so-called “high” and “low” culture, and that “The integration of Shakespeare as a whole should bring into serious question our tendency to see culture on a vertical plane, neatly divided into a hierarchy of inclusive adjectival categories such as ‘high,’ ‘low,’ ‘pop,’ ‘mass,’ ‘folk,’ and the like.” He also asserts that the “diverse audiences” that enjoyed Shakespeare as well as “such art forms as Italian opera...and such writers as Longfellow, Dickens, and Mark Twain...helps reveal the existence of a shared public culture to which we have not paid enough attention.”⁹ Levine also notes the tendency of rural performers to put on local-style entertainment during the act breaks of Shakespeare’s plays, and noted that after the end of a dramatic play such as Hamlet or Macbeth, the performers would often put on a lighthearted spoof of the play, referred to as a “farce.” Levine notes that while researching another project, he was surprised by

“the ubiquity of Shakespearean drama in the humor of the minstrels who would ask such riddles as, ‘When was England offered for sale at a very low price?’ and answer, ‘When King Richard offered his kingdom for a horse,’ or lampoon the ‘Seven Ages of Man’ soliloquy from *As You Like It*: ‘All the world’s a bar/And all the men and women merely drinkers/They have their hiccups and their staggerings.’”¹⁰

⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990), 30.

¹⁰ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 4.

More significant was Levine's startling realization that Shakespeare's ubiquity in nineteenth century America implied that it was part and parcel of the popular culture of the era. He writes:

"Being the product of my own society in which Shakespeare is firmly entrenched in the pantheon of high culture, I was surprised, and fascinated, by the notion that his plays might have been popular culture in the nineteenth century, but initially I resisted the idea. How could a playwright whom I had been taught to consider so formidable a talent as to be almost sacred, and whose plays were demanding even for educated readers in the twentieth century, have been accessible to the broad and far less well educated public a century earlier? It took a great deal of evidence to allow me to transcend my own cultural assumptions and accept the fact that Shakespeare actually *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America."¹¹

Levine's reaction upon realizing that his preconceived notions of "high" culture and "low" culture were ill-founded would probably be similar to the reactions of many academics who have been cultivated in an age where there is an artificial line drawn between pop culture and supposed high culture. But why is this line—dividing modern American culture like a metaphorical Berlin Wall—even there? Who drew it in the first place? And why?

One source of answers is the cityscape of New York City, specifically in two different leisure destinations in the Big Apple: Central Park and Coney Island. Today one might view them as two attractive destinations that could both be on the itinerary of a tourist in New York, but during their early days in the latter half of the nineteenth century, these two centers of leisure might have been seen as being attractive to two different types of people.

In *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, historian and American Studies scholar John F. Kasson paints a picture of late nineteenth century America being faced with two alternate visions of culture competing for dominance in the public eye. These two visions—one boisterous and fun-loving, the other prim and orderly—were symbolized by Coney Island and Central Park respectively.

¹¹ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 4.

Coney Island had begun attracting visitors from Manhattan and the rest of Brooklyn by “the early nineteenth century. The first hotel, the Coney Island House, was built in 1829, and in the antebellum period the area slowly acquired a few restaurants, bathhouses, and barrooms, and a small side-wheel steamboat service.”¹² For a while, it remained a sleepy, quiet resort for the leisure of the upper class, but its “combination of seclusion and proximity to New York also attracted a rougher element who demanded gamier amusement.”¹³ To be specific:

“As early as the 1860’s, Norton’s Point...had become a haven for gamblers...roughnecks, and prostitutes, who could ply their trades upon recreation seekers beyond the reach of New York and Brooklyn officials. Such elements constituted the counterculture of Victorian America; their activities, an inversion of genteel cultural norms.”¹⁴

But this was just the beginning:

“By the turn of the century commercial entertainments were sweeping the urban middle class and even penetrating the lives of the working class, despite the fact that most manual laborers still worked just under ten hours a day, six days a week, and barring layoffs, fifty-two weeks a year for annual earnings of approximately \$600. Although for poorer individual and families domestic-centered events such as birthdays, weddings, and holidays remained the principal recreations, these were increasingly supplemented by commercial amusements such as dance halls, music halls, neighborhood theaters, vaudeville houses, the movies, and amusement parks...It emerged as a popular countertype to Chicago’s White City, an alternative model of urban recreation.”¹⁵ And popular it was. “Impressed by the extraordinary size of the crowds at Coney, turn-of-the-century observers were equally struck by their diversity”¹⁶ No longer a place reserved for the genteel classes, “Coney Island drew upon all social classes and especially upon the

¹² John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), 29.

¹³ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 29-30.

¹⁴ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 29-30.

¹⁵ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 36.

¹⁶ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 38.

rising middle class and the more prosperous working-class visitors, salesmen, clerks, tradesmen, secretaries, shop attendants, laborers, and the like.”¹⁷

Perhaps most significantly, the starched-stiff genteel mores of the Victorian Era began to fade away when one entered Coney Island. Kasson affirms that:

“an essential element of Coney Island’s appeal for virtually all its visitors was the contrast it offered to conventional society, everyday routine, and dominant cultural authorities...Designers of both Central Park and the Columbian Exposition had sought to create environments that would ultimately reinforce existing social structures and discipline public life. Coney Island, by contrast, provided an area in which visitors were temporarily freed from normative demands...Commentators often observed, ‘Coney Island has a code of conduct which is all her own.’”¹⁸

Indeed, the stern sexual mores typically associated with the Victorian Era, usually clamped down on society like a tightly-fitting chastity belt, fell off at Coney Island. In the face of the strictness of their parents—who often insisted that daughters always go out with a male chaperon—young people flocked to Coney Island precisely to feel freer.

“In such circumstances, as one New Yorker from an immigrant working-class family later recalled, for the young, ironically, ‘privacy could be had only in public.’ Sidewalks, public parks, dance halls, and amusement parks offered opportunities to meet and enjoy the company of the opposite sex. At Coney Island in particular, unattached young men and women easily struck up acquaintanceships for the day or evening...Coney Island thus offered strikingly visible expression major shifts in sexual mores traditionally associated with the 1920’s but beginning to take place at this time.”¹⁹

It was an early sexual revolution—discreetly occurring in the middle of the frumpy Victorian Era, and the young visitors of Coney Island were eager participants. In doing so, these young Americans were shedding the Victorian-style sexual mores of the time—mores, such as the daughters-need-a-chaperon-rule, that modern people would associate more with Saudi Arabia—and began rapidly moving closer and closer towards the casual openness of modern America.

¹⁷ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 38.

¹⁸ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 41.

¹⁹ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 42.

The elevation of the common man and woman to a position of importance and the melting away of Victorian repression combined to make Coney Island an incubator of the informal, casual openness that we would recognize as a modern American cultural trait.

“Period photographs of Coney Island bathers support this observation. Subjects characteristically stand, sit on the beach, or wade in the surf in noticeably more relaxed postures than pedestrians on city streets. They appear more animated and engrossed in their own particular pleasures, less concerned with paying deferential respect to the gathering as a whole. In some photographs bather call explicit attention to the freedom Coney Island permitted by striking broad, dramatic poses and exuberantly mugging for the camera. Lifting and supporting one another, arms and bodies interlinked, they display a sense of solidarity and mutual pleasure in the release of social restraints.”²⁰

At Coney Island, every man was a king. It was a place that could—much to the likely shock of someone like Noah Webster a century earlier—“make a ‘SOMEBODY’ out of a ‘MR. NOBODY,’”²¹ to re-use his distraught quote. Writing about Coney’s Luna Park, Kasson observes that Luna Park was

“a gigantic stage set that engulfed visitors in new roles...The production was lavishly staged throughout. Like the vaudeville palaces of the turn of the century and anticipating the ornate movie theaters of the 1920’s, Luna appealed to popular notions of magnificence...Elements such as the fantastic turreted façade of the ‘20,000 Leagues Under the Sea’ exhibition and the elevated promenade opposite, with its huge duck’s head decorations, lush plantings, and flags flying over all, were designed to fill visitors with a sense of importance.”²²

The potency of transporting everyday people to fantastical settings lives on today at Disney World, Universal Studios Theme Park (especially the Islands of Adventure attractions, one themed after Marvel Comics, one themed after the world of classical myth, one themed after classical American animation, etc.) and other theme parks that stand across America today.

“[The park’s founder Frederic] Thompson appropriated architectural symbols of luxury to confer upon his patrons an honored status. Before the mansions of the rich on New York’s Fifth Avenue they might feel humbled and excluded, but here they could feel

²⁰ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 45-46.

²¹ Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 304.

²² Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 65-66..

assured. Luna Park, in effect, democratized the hunger for aristocratic splendor that was driving rich industrialists to construct palatial houses at the turn of the century.”²³

Coney Island was a wonderland of public palaces, designed for the common man and woman. The public adored Coney Island, but they sought recreation in Central Park as well, and they wanted to have the same sense of fun in this space as in Coney Island...much to the chagrin of its designer, who wanted the public to come, but to promenade in an orderly fashion rather than engage in sweaty athletics. Coney Island and Central Park came of age at a time when Americans, denizens of an increasingly urbanized nation, were beginning to seek recreational activities that would allow them to move their bodies, get exercise, and feel the experience of physical challenge in the face of an increasingly sedentary and urban era of history. The scene is set in fascinating detail in John J. Miller’s illuminating and enjoyable book “The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football.” Miller writes that:

“the era of the frontier was coming to a close...For years, men in search of challenge and excitement had sensed the promise of the region. Theodore Roosevelt would feel its pull in the 1880s, when his student days were over. Yet its allure began to shift, however subtly. The days of exploring a vast and untamed wilderness transitioned into a period of agricultural development and community building.”²⁴

But even if the Wild West had to be tamed by the march of urbanization, Americans increasingly sought to save its sense of adventure, physical challenge, and excitement by increasingly integrating it into their everyday lives. This desire led to the rise of organized sports in America.

“On the east coast, sports boomed in popularity. Prior to the Civil War, organized athletics were almost unknown. Afterward, they became ubiquitous. Baseball started to assume its position as a national pastime. A huge and diverse range of activities—croquet, lawn tennis, archery, bicycling, and roller skating—spread from city to city. ‘This phenomenal development in the nation’s recreational life that had yet taken place,’ wrote Foster Rhea Dulles, a historian (and a cousin of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles). ‘The traditions of pioneer life had influenced [Americans] along very definite

²³ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 65-66.

²⁴ John J. Miller, *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 12.

lines, and the restrictions of urban living warred against a feeling for the outdoors which was in their blood. With the gradual passing of so much of what the frontier had always stood for, sports provided a new outlet for an inherently restless people.”²⁵

The YMCA—offering both charity and athletics to the public—exploded in popularity and set up shop in cities and towns across the nation during this period. At the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA in 1891, Canadian-American immigrant James Naismith developed basketball. That same YMCA in little Springfield would soon after become the birthplace of volleyball as well. It was a period of intense and widespread growth of athletics. Not coincidentally, this was the same period in which Theodore Roosevelt began to formulate his idea of the Strenuous Life, an idea he would eventually articulate as President.

The popular rise of organized athletics necessitated facilities for the sports that were sweeping across America. The national movement for the creation of urban parks, took place during the same half century as the rise of organized sports, arguably for the same reasons. The two dovetailed perfectly when the public began calling for sports facilities to be included in the plans for the spreading network of urban parks across the country. In the minds of many, these twin movements—both responses to the closing of the West and the increasing urbanization of America—could and should work hand-in-hand to bring physical strength, nature-like environments, and good physical and mental health to the denizens of the American city. So when Central Park was completed, working class New Yorkers eagerly anticipated being able to play baseball and other sports on the park’s gorgeous emerald fields.

Meanwhile, Frederick Law Olmsted—the designer of New York’s Central Park and Newark’s Branch Brook Park—envisioned Central Park as a space where New Yorkers and visitors to the city could come to admire the beautiful vistas...and do little else. As Kasson

²⁵ Miller, *The Big Scrum*, 7.

notes, “Olmsted made little provision for the desire of working-class males to have ‘manly and blood-tingling recreations,’ ‘boisterous fun and rough sports.’”²⁶ Olmsted was part of a core of gentry who attempted to impose their will on the public by steering it away from recreations such as sports and towards promenading and other supposedly-gentlemanly activities, and these gentry eventually frowned on the New York public’s adoration of Coney Island when it became a major destination towards the end of the century.

Olmsted in fact fought tooth-and-nail against the latter inclusion of sports facilities in Central Park. In the article “Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform,” Geoffrey Blodgett writes that:

“Olmsted was constantly embittered by the public’s failure to understand the purpose of his parks or accept his trained expertise. His attitude on this score was as candidly elitist as that of any political Mugwump. His anger focused on the fate of Central Park and the long quarrel over its meaning and use...From the outset Olmsted had defined the park primarily as a work of art, and its primary benefits remained in his mind mainly visual and psychic.”²⁷

Olmsted ended up angrily and indignantly fighting the public’s desire to include sporting grounds and a zoo in the park (the fact that both of these now exist would surely be a source of anger and resentment on Olmsted’s part), among other additions. Blodgett notes that this fight was emblematic of

“a struggle over competing goals which is precisely analogous to the strife, waged across the Gilded Age in other arenas, between the cosmopolitan, professional elitism of the Mugwump gentry and the pluralistic impulses of urban democracy under local leaders. In Olmsted’s case, much of the problem lay in the inherent ambiguity of Central Park, the first large public park in the New World. Translating an eighteenth-century, aristocratic, European concept of sculptured pastoral space into the American urban vernacular was no easy feat.”²⁸

²⁶ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 13.

²⁷ Geoffrey Blodgett, “Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform,” *The Journal of American History* 62 (1976): 876-877.

²⁸ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 879.

Indeed, what Olmsted was witnessing was the blossoming of this staid “eighteenth-century, aristocratic, European concept of sculptured pastoral space” into a budding new post-Revolutionary War, post-Jeffersonian democratic space, where people of all social strata would have a chance to exercise their recreational desires, not just a space for the gentry to promenade. And he resented it. He wanted all the masses of the city to come to the park, of course, but he wanted them to enjoy it in what he viewed as the *correct* way. To that end, Olmsted lobbied for strict rules on *how* visitors would be allowed to enjoy the park, and according to Lawrence Levine:

“the regulations, as reported by an observer in 1868, isolated the park from the disorderly world surrounding it: ‘No shows of any kind are allowed on the Park’s grounds; no jugglers, gamblers—except those disguised as gentlemen—puppet shows, peddlers of flowers, players upon so-called musical instruments, ballad singers, nor hand-organ men.’”²⁹

The dire threat of children’s puppet shows simply needed to be thwarted.

This attitude was symptomatic of Olmsted’s snobbish attitudes towards the public. According to Levine, Olmsted once asserted that “‘A large part of the people of New York...are ignorant of a park...They will need to be trained to the proper use of it.’”³⁰ Moreover, “Olmsted’s Central Park, and many of the other urban parks of the period, afforded what Robert Weyeneth has aptly called a ‘didactic landscape,’ a ‘moral space,’ which could only function as intended if the proper order was maintained.”³¹

As noted above, Olmsted wasn’t alone in his convictions. Olmsted was part of a circle of friends that included journalist and editor Edwin L. Godkin, lawyer and presidential descendant Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and professor and social critic Charles Eliot Norton. This group of intellectuals, writers, and—in Olmsted’s case—landscape artist, resented the

²⁹ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 186.

³⁰ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 183.

³¹ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 186.

public at large, despising the tastes of the common man, and bemoaning their own lack of control over the direction of public culture. Like the old Federalists who in Wood's words "did not think of themselves as a party but rather as natural leaders who possessed superior social and cultural credentials,"³² Olmsted's latter-day clique also viewed themselves as the natural and rightful arbiters of culture. Through their efforts in shaping civic life, they helped create a phenomenon that Levine refers to as the *sacralization of culture*, in which some aspects of culture are considered highbrow and thus worthy of consumption and others are considered lowbrow and to be tossed aside.

This clique was at the pinnacle of a social group that had been forming for years. In his fascinating sociological study *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*, the noted *New York Times* columnist David Brooks traces the history of the social class often known as bohemians in one of the early chapters (as a prelude to introducing his idea of the modern "bourgeois bohemians") and discusses how the bohemian class of the nineteenth century railed against the values of the middle class majority. Brooks writes that:

"Within half a century of [Benjamin] Franklin's death in 1790, writers, artists, intellectuals, and radicals were in open rebellion against the growing dominance of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois tastes... In a world dominated by the merchant classes, these artists no longer had aristocratic sponsors to flatter, which was emancipating, but they had to fend for themselves in the marketplace, which brought its own traumas. To succeed, artists and writers had to appeal to an impersonalized audience, and many of these creative types came to resent their dependence on disembodied middle-class patrons, who never seemed to pay sufficient homage to genius. And as writers and artists felt more and more detached from the rest of society, they developed heroic images of their own importance."³³

³² Wood, *Empire of Liberty*, 303.

³³ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 65.

In the process of portraying themselves as unacknowledged geniuses and misunderstood would-be saviors of culture, the bohemians' resentment of the middle class (as well as of the marketplace they inhabited) grew into outright hatred. Brooks writes that

“One of the books that wonderfully captures the artistic revolt against the merchant class is Cesar Graña's 1964 work, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois*. In the 1830's, Graña notes, pained abhorrence of the bourgeoisie became the official emotion of most writers and intellectuals. Flaubert, the most virulent of the rebels, signed some of his letters with the title 'Bourgeoisophobus' and railed against the 'stupid grocers and their ilk.' Hatred of the bourgeoisie, he concluded, was 'the beginning of all virtue.' Stendhal dismissed Benjamin Franklin, 'the Philadelphia artisan,' as a pious bore.”³⁴

They rejected the commercial bent of the middle class (but especially resented the fact that the middle class did not spend their commercial funds on their artwork) and resented the middle class's recreational and artistic tastes. The artists that the public adored were therefore considered persona non grata among the majority of the bohemians. The bohemians bridled in frustration at the middle class's lack of head-over-heels adoration for the supposed genius of *their* artistic endeavors. And thus pop culture—the collection of works enjoyed by the middle class majority—ended up on the receiving end of the bohemians' hatred.

This phenomenon only became more pronounced than ever as the nineteenth century concluded and

“an assertive new economic elite arose with less intimate ties to the custodians of culture. While some genteel reformers successfully formed alliances with these figures, often they found their social position overshadowed by the nouveaux riches, their authority in eclipse. Resentfully, genteel spokesmen castigated the great industrialists as cultural barbarians, without education, refinement, responsibility, or restraint.”³⁵ Thus, the gentry's resentment of the rising middle class and nouveau riche of the industrial era continued intensifying.

Olmsted's clique epitomized the growing attitude of the chip-on-their-shoulder bohemian class. In “Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative

³⁴ Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise*, 66.

³⁵ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 5.

Reform,” Blodgett refers to them as “an aspiring intellectual elite in a nation which did not want an elite, and met its overtures with constant scorn.”³⁶ He notes that Olmsted once whined to an English-born acquaintance of his that “The American majority had many faults,” but that their lack of deference for “the cultivated few” left him longing for “arrangements politically and socially, as in England, with special reference to the convenience with which superior talent, tact, and taste may be exercised for the benefit of the community.”³⁷ Olmsted bemoaned the fact that his English friend and other members of Olmsted’s favored clique were frustrated into remaining cloistered among themselves instead of being allowed to remake the public in their image. Nevertheless, the core members of Olmsted’s clique continued to bring forth hair-brained schemes to steer the public’s tastes towards theirs. Blodgett also notes that the beliefs of Olmsted and his clique included “a belief that American society needed to fortify itself against the crude and materialistic impulses of popular culture.”³⁸ Blodgett argues that “These men formed the core of a gentlemanly cosmopolitan elite which tried hard through the postwar [post-Civil War] years to impose its will on American political and cultural development,”³⁹ and he wryly notes that Olmsted “was one of the founders of American Social Science Association, whose charter stressed the ‘responsibilities of the gifted and educated classes toward the weak, the witless, and the ignorant.’”⁴⁰ How humble.

And the vision that they attempted to impose on American society was one that the average American would likely frown upon and resist. Blodgett’s piece makes note that

³⁶ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 871.

³⁷ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 870-871.

³⁸ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 871.

³⁹ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 871.

⁴⁰ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 874-875.

“Olmsted’s connection with the reformist gentry was not a matter of coincidence or chance. He shared their assumptions about the design of a good society, where hierarchy, deference, and skilled leadership might impose tranquility on a contentious, egalitarian people.”⁴¹

Significantly, this view was one that was shared across the Atlantic Ocean by various elites in Europe. Andrei Markovits writes in *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America* that:

“In contrast to other antipathies and prejudices against different collective entities, negative attitudes toward America increase with higher social status and class affiliation. Some European observers believe that one of the main reasons for the vehemence and durability of antipathy that European elites display toward America derives from their equating America with a despised proletarian culture that also involves something tempting and irresistible. ‘Anti-Americanism,’ writes Mary Kenny on the phenomenon in Great Britain, ‘is almost exclusively confined to the upper, or upper-middle, classes. It comes from Oxbridge (and public school) intellectuals, your Hampstead and Islington chattering classes, your Guardianistas with the holiday home in France, and also your old colonials residing in the shires.’”⁴²

Markovits documents how the traditional antipathy towards the USA among the aristocratic classes of Europe has existed since America’s beginnings and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

“Thus during the Civil War, leading members of the political classes in France and Britain openly rooted for the Confederacy, which they rightly assumed to be more akin to their own aristocratic ways. Indeed, they feared the brash, capitalist, industrial North, whose victory would inevitably make the United States a formidable political rival for global domination.”⁴³

Self-aggrandizing salons of intellectuals in Europe—similar to the ones Olmsted belonged to in America—detested the populist, un-aristocratic nature of American culture.

Markovits notes that

“Following this trend of loathing America... Heinrich Heine hated America, ‘that monstrous prison of freedom, where the invisible chains would oppress me even more

⁴¹ Blodgett, *Frederick Law Olmsted*, 872.

⁴² Andrei Markovits, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 36-37.

⁴³ Markovits, 45.

heavily than the visible ones at home, and where the most repulsive of all tyrants, the populace, hold vulgar sway.’ In America, according to Heine, ‘there are no princes or nobles there; all men are equal—equal dolts!’”⁴⁴
Clearly, Heine was not a fan of Article I Section 9.

That “most repulsive of” quotes by Heine provides a very revealing insight into the mindset of his social clique. European gentry and intellectuals thus believed that America was too egalitarian in its culture, its people—the “most repulsive of all tyrants” in Heine’s words—were insufficiently deferential to those that he viewed as the Right Kind of People™, and that her boisterous masses needed to be tamed by the guiding hand of a hierarchical, ruling elite. The theme of American culture being accused of being insufficiently deferential to the tastes and inclinations of an elite, of the Right Kind of People™ (who always just happen to include the critic who is making the assertion), is a running theme that was and still is also present in the critiques of many American critics of American culture, such as that of Olmsted and his clique, as described above.

This similarity in attitudes between European cultural authorities and American upper-class gentry (who were often WASPs) arguably was the origin of a general feeling of Europhilia (and accompanying cultural self-hatred towards American culture) that grew common among upper-class Americans who recoiled from the earthy, open, and free-wheeling nature of American popular culture and longed to hearken back to the older aristocratic traditions of Europe. The sacralization of culture, as described by Levine, is often very rooted in this feeling of Europhilia and accompanying cultural self-hatred of American pop culture. As he notes:

“The crusade for culture in America, then, was to a significant extent a struggle to bring into fruition on a new continent what the crusaders considered the traditional civilization from which the earliest Americans sprang and to which all Americans were heir. The

⁴⁴ Markovits, 57.

primary obstacle to the emergence of a worthy American music, Frederick Nast asserted in 1881, ‘lies in the diverse character of our population.’”⁴⁵

The racist sentiments expressed in the aforementioned quote were explicitly frowning on America’s diversity and implicitly hearkening back to culture of Europe.

“In 1898 Sidney Lanier argued that it was time for Americans to move back ‘into the presence of the Fathers’ by adding the study of Old English... ‘Our culture needs Anglo-Saxon iron; there is no ruddiness in its cheeks, and everywhere a clear lack of the red corpuscles.’ American society, Henry Adams observed in his autobiography, ‘offered the profile of a long, struggling caravan, stretching loosely towards the prairies, its few score of leaders far in advance and its millions of immigrants, negroes and Indians far in the rear, somewhere in archaic time.’”⁴⁶

The would-be conductors of culture were adamant that the only acceptable culture was the hierarchical, aristocratic one of Europe.

On the bright side, the very fact that these cultural snobs and racists were getting infuriated was a sign that American culture—whether people realized it or not—was increasingly taking the population’s diversity into account, albeit often inadvertently.

⁴⁵ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 221.

⁴⁶ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 221.

Chapter 2: The War on Football

In any case, Olmsted's exclusive clique also attempted to not only to subtly steer the public away from sports through landscape design, but to crush the rise of organized sports. The game of football was a particular target. Still in its infancy, it was almost strangled in its crib by the busy hands of Charles W. Eliot—Harvard's president and a prominent member of Olmsted's self-aggrandizing social clique—in the late 1800's and early 1900's, as documented in John J. Miller's "The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football." Miller describes in detail how

“a group of activists crusaded against football. They wanted not merely to remove violence from the sport, but to ban it as an activity. At the dawn of the Progressive Era, the prohibition of football became a social and political movement whose most outspoken proponents recoiled from the sport. Their ranks included the renowned Harvard president Charles W. Eliot, frontier scholar Frederick Jackson Turner, aging Confederate general John Singleton Mosby, and muckraking journalists.”¹

Harvard in fact had instituted a ban on football in 1885, but it was short-lived and quickly overturned, much to Eliot's dissatisfaction.

A spate of violent occurrences on college campuses—occurring at the same time that football was rising in popularity—led to the familiar fallacy of correlation equals causation that often still results in sensationalized media panic attacks today. Particularly, Frederick Law Olmsted's friend E. L. Godkin insisted that

“‘It is more than a chance coincidence...that this recent revival of brutality accompanies the over development of college athletics and the football craze.’ Godkin cited Eliot's report to Harvard's board of overseers as evidence.”² Godkin had worked as “a contributor to the *North American Review*, edited by Charles Eliot Norton—the cousin of Harvard's president and the man behind the college's short-lived ban in

¹ Miller, *The Big Scrum*, 12.

² Miller, 143.

1885...Norton appreciated Godkin as a special talent and tapped him to run the *Nation*.”³

Miller also notes that

“The *Nation* did not enjoy a large audience, but its elite readership was uncommonly influential. For fans of football, Godkin’s decision to crusade against the sport marked an unwelcome development. He let loose a barrage of editorial abuse. He called football ‘not only brutal but brutalizing.’...Godkin attacked the concept, advanced by Roosevelt and [Woodrow] Wilson, that football improved character: Football ‘cannot fail to blunt the sensibilities of young men, stimulate their bad passions, and drown their sense of fairness,’ he wrote.”⁴

Even if the elites held football in disdain, it was still growing in popularity on college campuses...much to the chagrin of Eliot, Godkin, and their social circle.

“By the early 1880’s, as football and other intercollegiate sports grew in popularity and attracted thousands of fans to the biggest games, Eliot wanted to obtain more control over them. He was instrumental in the creation of an athletic committee appointed by the faculty to oversee and regulate sports at the college...Charles Eliot Norton, an art historian as well as a cousin of Harvard’s president, served as chairman. John W. White, a professor of Greek, was a member of the panel too. The third and final member was [gymnasium director Dudley] Sargent...Sargent shared Eliot’s animus toward competition. He called it the ‘crying evil of the age’ and ‘the arch-enemy of all true culture.’”⁵

To elaborate on Eliot’s hatred of competition:

“What bothered Eliot most, it seems, was competition—and how it motivated players to conduct themselves in ways he considered unworthy of gentlemen. If baseball and football were honorable pastimes, then why did they require umpires and referees?...Moreover, a pitcher who threw a curveball engaged in an act of deception, reasoned Eliot...Football distressed him even more.”⁶

In his annual report to Harvard’s board of overseers, used by Godkin as evidence of football’s unworthiness, Eliot fretted that “the growth of intercollegiate athletics...produced ‘an unwholesome desire for victory,’ which Eliot likened to the ‘supreme savagery’ of war.”⁷

This sentiment is arguably still held by many critics today. But if there was one thing Eliot hated more than football, it was football fans. Miller writes

³ Miller, 143.

⁴ Miller, 144.

⁵ Miller, 106.

⁶ Miller, 104-105.

⁷ Miller, 139.

“Even the behavior of spectators appalled him. Before the start of a game against Yale in Cambridge, he heard a group of his students chant, ‘Three cheers for Harvard and down with Yale!’ He regarded this as bad mannered: ‘Of course it’s right to be enthusiastic for your own side, but why sing a song that’s rude to our guests?’ So he proposed an alternative: ‘Why wouldn’t it be better to sing ‘Three cheers for Harvard and one for Yale’? His suggestion did not catch on.”⁸

But his animosity towards football gradually did, at least among the self-proclaimed guardians of culture. Eliot and his clique eventually led a campaign to ban football, culminating in the proposed ban beginning to be implemented at various colleges. In response, a summit was called by President Theodore Roosevelt—a fan of the game since his own days at Harvard, during which Eliot had already begun his presidency—in 1905 between college representatives to save the game by agreeing on some ground rules for safety in exchange for the game’s continued existence. In those days, it was almost entirely a college phenomenon, and banning it at the college-level could have killed it completely.

Theodore Roosevelt was contacted by Endicott Peabody, one of TR’s college buddies “who had worked with Walter Camp on the committee that had produced *Football Facts and Figures*. Peabody was a cousin of Roosevelt’s first wife. He had served as an usher at the wedding.”⁹ Peabody appealed to Roosevelt to help reform the game’s excesses and help it stay on college campuses. Acknowledging that Roosevelt was just concluding the peace negotiations of the Russo-Japanese War, he wrote that “‘At a time when your powers are being tried to the utmost, I hesitate to do anything to add to your burden,” but explains that while he was a fan, the game’s violent excesses could be curbed, writing “‘You and I believe in the game, and in its beneficial effects upon boys and young men when it is carried on fairly,’ he wrote.”¹⁰ Peabody exhorted Roosevelt to:

⁸ Miller, 105.

⁹ Miller, 184.

¹⁰ Miller, 184-185.

“spark ‘a complete revolution’ by summoning the coaches of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale ‘and persuade them to undertake to teach men to play football honestly.’ Roosevelt was in a unique position to improve the game: ‘You are the one man, so far as I know, who could accomplish this without much effort.’ Roosevelt responded immediately: ‘I agree with you absolutely.’”¹¹

Roosevelt—a notable champion of the Progressive movement of that era—found himself up against the uncomfortable position of having to oppose many fellow progressives. Eliot and his allies were high-profile members of the movement. The *Nation* magazine, the then-and-current gospel of progressivism, growled that

“Football was ‘evil’ and ‘a grave menace.’ It did not deserve a correction, even one whose ‘inspiration is from the White House.’ The sport, it concluded, must be eliminated once and for all. The publication trumpeted a quote from Shailer Mathews, the dean of the divinity school at the University of Chicago: ‘Football today is a social obsession—a boy-killing, education prostituting, gladiatorial sport.’ The magazine also demanded specific action: ‘A few schools and small colleges have abolished football, but its death-blow must come from such an institution as Harvard or Columbia.’”¹²

Columbia apparently agreed, instituting a ban against football during the Thanksgiving break, when the students—who likely would have protested—were at home.

Nevertheless, TR—in his characteristically fearless manner—was not one to back down from the fight, even against those who shared his political views on other issues. Roosevelt had attended Harvard during an earlier era of Charles Eliot’s presidency (which spanned decades), but there was no love lost between the two men. Eliot dismissively “recalled Roosevelt as a ‘feeble’ boy who read a lot but never got ‘to the bottom of things.’” When asked if he could detect Harvard’s influence on Roosevelt, Eliot responded simply: “No.””¹³

¹¹ Miller, 184-185.

¹² Miller, 198-199.

¹³ Miller, 109.

Still, Roosevelt tried to be diplomatic towards Eliot. Attempting to speak softly rather than using the proverbial big stick, “He wrote to his old nemesis, encouraging him to join a productive reform effort, perhaps involving the selection of referees.”¹⁴ Miller notes:

“The letter was typed, but included a handwritten postscript: ‘Don’t you think there is a certain amount of hysteria in the present excitement about football?’ Eliot, of course, did not think that better referees would improve the sport—and he probably took exception to Roosevelt’s use of the word *hysteria*.”¹⁵

Eliot continued to insist that the game be banned, and pooh-poohed the idea that a conference on football would provide a satisfactory solution.

But Teddy Roosevelt went ahead and began planning the football summit. Roosevelt began sending invitations out to the various teams to meet at the White House. The three most prominent Ivies attended Roosevelt’s working lunch. On October 9, 1905, Roosevelt “wrote to his son Kermit at Groton: ‘Today I see the football men of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, to try and get them to come to a gentleman’s agreement not to have mucker play.’”¹⁶

Miller relates that when Roosevelt entered the White House dining room for his luncheon with the football luminaries, he “probably took an immediate interest in Reid, Harvard’s twenty-six-year-old coach, hired earlier in the year. Roosevelt was a loyal Harvard man, and he would have wanted to size up the new coach.”¹⁷ Also present at the meeting was the man most eminent in football circles, Walter Camp, the founding father of the game. “Roosevelt had hoped that William Howard Taft would attend...He was...an alumnus of Yale, and Roosevelt thought that his presence would balance his own Harvard loyalties.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Miller, 199-200.

¹⁵ Miller, 199-200.

¹⁶ Miller, 186.

¹⁷ Miller, 187.

¹⁸ Miller, 187.

Such were TR's strong Harvard loyalties that he felt that Taft needed to be around to balance them out. In any case, the meeting of the minds needed to commence, with or without Taft.

"Roosevelt opened the conversation. 'Football is on trial,' he said. 'Because I believe in the game, I want to do all I can to save it. And so I have called you all down here to see whether you won't all agree to abide by both the letter and spirit of the rules, for that will help.'"¹⁹ Miller notes that, to back up his statement about the need for some ground rules to be enforced, Roosevelt:

"provided examples of what he considered crooked play by Harvard, Princeton, and Yale in previous seasons. He discussed the case of a team's coach urging his players to commit fouls when the referees could not see them. Roosevelt said that just as cheating at cards was disgraceful, so was cheating at football. Both deserved punishment. He insisted that players and coaches must conduct themselves honorably, rather than with an eye toward securing an unfair advantage."²⁰

Roosevelt was determined to save the game by setting down some ground rules for safety and sportsmanship. By taming its excesses and assuring the greater safety of the players, he would prevent the hardliners of Eliot's movement from killing the game.

Of course, some of the men at the gathering had to get over Roosevelt's acknowledgement that there had been abuses.

"The men from Princeton and Yale became defensive, refusing to confess any unfair play on the part of their teams. Camp, according to Reid, 'was very slippery and did not allow himself to be pinned down to anything.' At some point the conversation probably turned toward concrete steps that the colleges might take to reduce injuries and the game's overall violence."²¹

Miller writes that in spite of their initial defensiveness, the men at the table eventually discussed various steps that could be taken to reduce injuries in the game. For instance John Heisman—namesake of the Heisman Trophy—"had lobbied for the introduction of the forward pass, which he had seen performed illegally in 1895" for several years, while

¹⁹ Miller, 188.

²⁰ Miller, 188.

²¹ Miller, 188.

“[Walter] Camp strongly opposed this idea.”²² But the forward pass—an iconic play in the game we know and love today—gained support, at least partially due to the greater safety it allowed for, as well as its practicality on the raging fields of football. Those who attended also agreed to a joint statement to send to President Roosevelt after the meeting, acknowledging that there had been issues with foul play in football and affirming a commitment to fixing the underlying problems behind the worst injuries.

The fight to save football was a fight to save a budding pastime—a new staple of American pop culture—from censorship. To lose that battle would have been to hand a triumph to those elites that would censor aspects American pop culture. Losing that battle would have set a precedent that American pop culture was subject to censorship and that killed off a budding sport in its infancy.

Today, football is a game that unites Americans of all political stripes in a weekly autumn ritual that then progresses into the snowy winter, in which Americans all across the country gather around their televisions and partake in a sort of shared national group activity of enjoying the game together. There are still those who—even to this day—express worries about football’s safety as a sport (and sometimes for quite justifiable reasons), and then there are still a few isolated individuals who would like to see the game go away altogether. But at the end of the day, there is one statistic that puts things into perspective: in their endlessly fascinating work *Freakonomics*, Stephen Dubner and Steve Levitt cite a study done by scholar Roland G. Fryer Jr. in the late 1990’s of the television-watching habits of white Americans and black Americans. The two Steves write that “Fryer had become intrigued by the virtual segregation of culture. Blacks and whites watch different television shows,” and

²² Miller, 188.

yet despite the differences in television-viewing habits between Americans of different ethnicities, “the only show that typically appears on each group’s top ten list”²³ is *Monday Night Football*. And so this shared, weekly national ritual—in which Americans of all colors gather around the TV and bond with nearby friends and share an experience in communion with countrymen across the United States—serves a truly unifying purpose. Americans often argue about politics, race, and other hot button topics. But perhaps common ground begins on Sunday morning and Monday night.

²³ Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005), 166.

Chapter 3: Comic Books On Trial

Comic books began emerging as an art form and an industry in the early 20th century, and came into being in the form modern readers would recognize in 1933. From the very beginning, they featured imagination-sparking tales of science fiction and fantasy, as well as detective stories, westerns, and horror stories. But arguably the most seminal moment in comic book history arrived in 1938 with the publication of *Action Comics #1*. Action Comics' inaugural issue would change the course of comic books—and American culture—forever with the introduction of a character that would quickly grow into a phenomenon: Superman.

Superman—the first character recognizable as a modern superhero character—revolutionized the comic book genre, and superheroes would quickly become flagship characters of the comic book industry. The following year began the rise of the Dark Knight—Batman—in *Detective Comics #27*. Shortly thereafter, other heroes such as Wonder Woman and Captain America began arriving on the scene. It is with good reason that the years from Superman's triumphant arrival through the course of World War II are retroactively referred to by historians and cultural scholars as the Golden Age of Comics.

And it was during World War II when comics were actually sanctioned by the government, as a way to boost morale among American GIs stationed across the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific. Indeed, Captain America's very first appearance on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* in 1941 features Cap giving a stunned Adolf Hitler a well-deserved punch across the face, an image that must have been as hugely satisfying then as it remains today. "Not coincidentally," writes Katherine G. Aiken in the April 2010 issue of

Organization of American Historians Magazine of History, “co-creators Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzburg) and Joe Simon were young Jewish Americans, anxious for the U.S. to join the war against Hitler.”¹ Likewise, 1942’s *Wonder Woman #1* features the Amazon warrior princess riding heroically into battle against a group of awestruck German soldiers. Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Superman were all depicted in stories where they fought against the Axis Powers (as hearkened to in 2011’s blockbuster movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*), and the government was quite appreciative of the positive effect comics were having on the war effort. Writing about Captain America and Wonder Woman, Katherine G. Aiken notes that “*Captain America* and *Wonder Woman* both first appeared during World War II and have continued to mirror developments in the wider American society. Despite their gender differences, the two represent a similar tradition of patriotic crime fighting.”²

The very origin story of Captain America illustrated the appeal he had for many of the working-class men fighting in the war.

“Steve Rogers grows up in an immigrant family...on the lower east side of Manhattan...Rogers is caught up in the widespread zeal to defeat the Axis but is unable to qualify for the regular military. Instead he volunteers to participate in a...scientific experiment. An injection of...super-soldier serum transforms Rogers from the proverbial ninety-pound weakling to an exemplary specimen of American manhood.”³

Although the first issue premiered several months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the character of Captain America struck a chord with an American public that was growing increasingly aware that the United States was going to be pulled into the war sooner or later.

“As his co-creator Jack Kirby noted, ‘We weren’t at war yet, but everyone knew it was coming, that’s why Captain America was born; America needed a superpatriot. He

¹ Katherine G. Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* Vol. 24 No. 2 (2010); 41.

² Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” 41.

³ Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” 45.

symbolized the American Dream.”⁴ Captain America reminded American soldiers of the ideals that they were fighting for, and urged them to keep fighting until the Axis had collapsed.

American soldiers carried the easily-portable comics with them on their military campaigns, and eagerly awaited the arrival of the next batch of issues. The emerging art form was immensely popular among the GIs. Clearly, the famed actor, comedian, and USO performer Bob Hope wasn't alone in raising the morale of Americans stationed abroad, as Superman, Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel all pitched in. Unfortunately for the medium, the postwar climate would gradually become much tougher for comic books, especially superhero comics.

After World War II, comics began to suffer a period of declining readership, in large part because of competition from the rise of another popular medium, television. In her book *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, journalist Jennifer K. Stuller describes the postwar mood, where “Additionally, after the war, public interest in superheroes declined as a sense of normalcy settled over the nation. As with the women of wartime industry, once the war was won, superheroes were no longer needed.”⁵ Captain America, Wonder Woman, and other heroes who'd battled the Nazis were now put out to pasture from the minds of many readers now that the Nazi threat had been quashed. Many felt that superheroes could be put away along with the GI uniforms their comics had been tucked in. And so the superhero comic—shockingly to modern readers—lost a huge chunk of market share...for the time being.

Still, comic books continued to maintain a niche in the larger market. One genre of comics that was still flourishing was horror comics. Stuller writes that:

⁴ Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” 45.

⁵ Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*, (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 25.

“Whereas caped crusaders and masked avengers had once dominated newsstand space, gaps left by discontinued titles were quickly filled by other genres. Horror comics, Westerns, funny animal stories, and romance comics rose to the fore, many of these directed toward a new market called ‘the teenager.’”⁶

Within a few years, that same budding teenage market would be tapped at the box office by James Dean and at the record store by a certain Mr. Elvis Presley.

In the introduction to the horror comic anthology “The Horror! The Horror! Comic Books the Government Didn’t Want You to Read!”—organized by and including commentary from Jim Trombetta—R. L. Stine of the 1990’s “Goosebumps” books and show—writes in his special guest introduction about his childhood during this era, noting that

“All the kids in the neighborhood gathered at the big tree in my front yard. We all brought our stacks of comic books. We would spend summer afternoon after summer afternoon reading them, talking about them and swapping them. The horror comics were our favorites. The art was amazing. The stories were ghastly and gruesome. They were written with something new to us: a wonderful combination of humor and horror.”⁷

But it was not to last. Stine notes, with a tone of sadness, that “The wall of comics at my drugstore suddenly looked sparse and dull. And I struggled to find something exciting to spend my two dimes on. My friends and I grumbled and moaned about the loss.” He grimly and sarcastically notes that “We didn’t know our delicate minds were being protected.”⁸

A psychologist by the name of Frederic Wertham was launching savage allegations against the comic book world, claiming that comics, particularly the horror comics that Stine and his friends loved so much, were corrupting children’s minds. Stine made accusations about comics that seemed tailor-made to stoke the fears and anxieties of the parents of that generation. Wertham published a questionable study called “Seduction of the Innocent,” in

⁶ Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons*, 25.

⁷ Jim Trombetta, R. L. Stine, *The Horror! The Horror! Comic Books the Government Didn’t Want You to Read!*, (New York: Abrams ComicsArts, 2010), 9.

⁸ Trombetta, Stine, 9.

which he accused horror comics of causing a rise in juvenile delinquency. But it seems likely that the only innocents being seduced were the parents who were being sucked in by Dr. Wertham's hyperbolic rhetoric, perhaps because they were desperate for an explanation for their children's delinquency that didn't directly implicate themselves as parents. In any case, Dr. Wertham's accusations were like a designer drug, injected into the parents and tailored for the specific purpose of addling their nerves and getting them worked up into a frenzy as they searched for someone else to blame for their children's discipline problems.

These parents' hunt for a scapegoat dovetailed neatly with Dr. Wertham's own social beliefs. In the book "Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society," Danny Fingeroth writes that:

"Wertham...believed in societal, as opposed to individual, responsibility for social problems, especially the postwar scourge of what was called 'juvenile delinquency.' This perceived rise in the quantity and brutality of crimes committed by children and teenagers was seen by Wertham and others as stemming from a popular culture that numbed children to the effects of violence, racism, and sexism. For whatever reasons—perhaps because the comics industry was less formidable than the movie or TV industries—Wertham attacked comics."⁹

And it was becoming disturbingly effective. In his piece "Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books" Jamie Coville grimly declares that

"The 'arrival' of Dr. Fredric Wertham was the scariest thing to ever happen to comic books. He was a highly distinguished psychologist who thought comic books were bad for kids, and his efforts to have them censored had a horrible and lasting impact that still affect comic books to this day."¹⁰

Among his other allegations, Dr. Wertham took issue with the resilience and feisty independence of the feminine icon Wonder Woman. Wertham grouched that Wonder Woman's fortitude and ability to come up with her own ideas and act on her own terms

⁹ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), 22.

¹⁰ "Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books", accessed May 5, 2012, http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html.

without the guidance of men somehow indicated that she was, in fact, a lesbian, as well as accusing Batman and Robin of being homosexual. According to Fingerroth, Wertham

“famously put forth the notions that Batman and Robin sharing a mansion as Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson ‘is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together,’ and that ‘the homosexual connotation of the Wonder Woman type of story is psychologically unmistakable.’ In an era when homosexuality was considered a mental illness, clearly this was no compliment.”¹¹

So there was an element of homophobia in Wertham’s ideas as well, and certainly a pervasive element of homophobia in the parents who got riled up because of Wertham’s study.

The panic initiated by Wertham put at risk the social good that Wonder Woman was doing for young girls across America. From the very start, Wonder Woman had been envisioned by her creator, William Moulton Marston to be a positive role model for young girls.

“[Marston] and comic impresario Max Gaines began discussing superhero comics and their impact (or lack thereof) on girls. Despite ridicule from much of the comic book industry, Marston (writing under the pseudonym Charles Moulton and in association with his wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, and son Peter), debuted Wonder Woman in 1941.”¹²

She was meant to rouse girls out of their societally-imposed limitations and make them realize that they could become go-getters and achieve just as much in life as any man. In a way, she was a character very much in the same vein as Rosie the Riveter, from that era’s war propaganda posters, but perhaps went even farther, as Wonder Woman’s ethos encouraged girls to better themselves both in wartime and in peacetime. This is certainly an example of pop culture pushing the boundaries of society’s then-limitations and furthering the goal of advancing freedom for women.

¹¹ Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 22-23.

¹² Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” 46.

In one story from the Golden Age, Wonder Woman meets a young girl named Olive Norton. “Olive wanted to play baseball with her brothers, and, of course, they responded negatively. Wonder Woman proclaimed, ‘You can be as strong as any boy if you’ll work hard and train yourself in athletics, the way boys do.’”¹³ In a world that still held low expectations of what girls could accomplish, she was letting them know that they could accomplish more than they had ever imagined, and not just in sports and recreation, but in life in general. Now Dr. Wertham, offended by the very notion, threatened to quash it, much like Charles Eliot had attempted to quash football. Wertham began a campaign to restrict the sales of comic books and decrease access to horror comics particularly. Like the prohibitionists against alcohol or football, Wertham viewed society as needing to be melded to avoid an aspect of pop culture that he viewed as too wild, too unrestricted.

Some scholars have attempted to defend Dr. Wertham’s stance on comic books. “The scholar Bart Beaty has argued a revisionist position...as cited by Louis Menand on March 31, 2008. In this view, Wertham was not a lurking censor but a courageous underdog, sticking up for voiceless children against powerful publishing interests.”¹⁴ This attempt to retroactively canonize Wertham as a prototypical Woodward or Bernstein up against an evil Plumbers’ Squad of comic book publishers seems just a little bit odd, but nevertheless let us examine the possibility that Wertham was more than a mere censor in this matter. Trombetta describes the arguments of one of the aforementioned Wertham defenders thus:

“More important, Menand writes, is that,” Wertham “was against the [very restrictive Comics Code]. He did not want to censor comic books, only to restrict their sale so that kids could not buy them without a parent present. He wanted to give them the equivalent of an R rating.”¹⁵

¹³ Aiken, “Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History,” 46.

¹⁴ Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!*, 75.

¹⁵ Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!*, 75.

Admittedly, Louis Menand—as quoted by Trombetta—paints a picture of Fredric Wertham that makes him seem a bit more reasonable than the thrust of this paper would argue. Menand attempts to place him in a moderate position on the spectrum of opinions in the then-current debate. But according to Jim Trombetta, the problem arises when you actually examine what Wertham was arguing. Acknowledging Menand’s claims about Wertham being a moderate and his supposed support for a more measured solution than an extremely censored industry, Trombetta responds thus:

“Such a system would have had the advantage of being a rational, rather than magical, response to the issue. However, the text of *Seduction* never supports such a moderate position. The book presents an unmodulated, global denunciation not merely of the contents of comic books but also of the medium itself as undermining literacy.”¹⁶

Thus according to Trombetta, Menand’s defense of Wertham is actually not very well founded. Trombetta continues by analyzing Wertham’s report, writing that

“*Seduction* offers a crime argument and a reading-disability argument. The first proposition of the crime argument is ‘monkey see, monkey do.’ In this, Wertham seems to have abandoned psychoanalysis for B. F. Skinner-style stimulus-response behaviorism—or maybe good old original sin. In the parlance of the time, he endows the comic book with the power to ‘brainwash’ the child. If comic books show crimes, Wertham maintains, kids will helplessly imitate those very same crimes. And in Wertham’s view, all comics are crime comics. Horror...is a version of crime in which the antagonists aren’t bank robbers but, say, vampires. Even romance comics are not free of the taint—Wertham notes that girls get pregnant, the boyfriends are delinquents...For the super heroes in their gaudy tights, Wertham has a special loathing; they all but personify the comic books themselves, coming to life to molest the reader.”¹⁷

The fact that superhero comics—both then and now—incorporated elements of *all* of these genres would likely have infuriated Wertham. Presumably, he would have been disgusted by 2012’s hit superhero film *The Avengers*: Wertham likely would have been horrified by the otherworldly invasion force committing (war) crimes—to use a mild term—in the streets of New York, would have been disdainful of the romance between billionaire

¹⁶ Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!*, 75.

¹⁷ Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!*, 75-76.

playboy Tony Stark (Iron Man) and his assistant Pepper, and may have been terrified that the Incredible Hulk would somehow encourage the audience members to break out into a riot. In any case, Wertham's over-the-top fears about the content of comic books belie Menand's specious assertion that Wertham was not really crusading against the medium. Clearly, he was, and he was rather extreme about it.

And in 1954, Dr. Wertham's mad crusade began to gain traction. On Capitol Hill, a Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency was created, and was presided over by Senator Robert C. Hendrickson of New Jersey. In 1954, the subcommittee began to hold hearings on the various negative effects that comic books supposedly had on children. The senators largely focused on the horror comics that had excited thrill-seeking children such as the young, pre-*Goosebumps* R. L. Stine.

"On April 21, 1954, the day the comics died, Dr. Fredric Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, entered the Senate hearing room at Foley Square in New York City in a lab jacket, as if he were a super hero himself (Doc Science?) or perhaps a more traditional figure, the proverbial 'man in the white coat' who enforces sanity."¹⁸

And the gray, drab men on the Senate subcommittee were all too eager to listen to the man in the white coat. TIME Magazine reported on the hearings, and illustrated the scene both on Capitol Hill and at America's newsstands.

"On the newsstands of the U.S. and Canada, more comic books are sold than any other type of magazine. About a quarter of the 80 million comic books that readers buy each month are known as "horror comics," bearing such titles as *Tormented*, *The Thing*, *Web of Evil*. Typical plot: a gravedigger falls in love with a beautiful girl, kills her in a fit of passion and then makes love to the corpse. When rigor mortis sets in, the gravedigger is strangled in the dead girl's arms. Such gory plots and pictures, which brought on a congressional investigation of horror comics (TIME, May 3), have stirred up a nationwide campaign against the books."¹⁹

¹⁸ Trombetta, *The Horror! The Horror!*, 75.

¹⁹ "Horror on the Newsstands," *TIME Magazine*, September 27, 1954, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820350,00.html#ixzz1tvGgaix>.

This was the reputation that led to the support for the Senate subcommittee among frightened parents, and thus was set a fearful and hyperbolic environment in which the hearings were held, and various comic book publishers were put on edge by the political rabbleroising that was occurring over the content of the horror comics.

“Last week the campaign was running so strong that in Manhattan one of the biggest horror-comic publishers announced he was stopping publication of the books in response ‘to appeals by American parents.’ Entertaining Comics Publisher William M. Gaines had been a star witness before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. He had insisted his comic-book cover of an ax-wielding man holding aloft the severed head of a blonde was ‘in good taste, [but] would be in bad taste if the head were held a little higher so the neck would show blood dripping out.’ Gaines last week stopped his own flow of 2,000,000 horror comics a month, plans to substitute a ‘clean, clean line.’”²⁰

Gaines’s bold testimony before the humorless senators on the subcommittee—endearingly akin to the defiant and snarky testimony of Tony Stark’s cheeky testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee during 2010’s *Iron Man 2*—was the continuation of a generational struggle on behalf of comic books against censorship. Bill Gaines was the son of M. C. (Max) Gaines, who had also been comic book publisher and was the same Max Gaines who had given advice to William Moulton Marston that led to the creation of Wonder Woman. David Hadju, author of “The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America,” writes that:

“As an executive of All-American Comics publishing a line of superhero titles while overseeing the early issues of *Picture Stories from the Bible*, M. C. Gaines found himself on both sides of the Catholic Church’s bifurcated response to comic books. *Sensation Comics*, the title that featured Wonder Woman, appeared in 1942 (and for several years to follow) on the list of forbidden books issued by the Church’s National Organization for Decent Literature. Founded in 1939, the NODL was a twentieth-century descendant of Catholic agents for vetting cultural influences dating to the first years of printing, in the mid-sixteenth century, when the Vatican issued the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. After four hundred years, the index was still being published, although the global scale

²⁰ *TIME Magazine*, “Horror on the Newsstands.”

of its jurisdiction and the mammoth size of its accretion of books prohibited over the centuries limited its effectiveness in modern American parishes.”²¹
 M. C. Gaines had been up against the NODL, and his son William had thus inherited a struggle against censorship, now translating into the world of comic books in the modern era.

And Gaines did not hesitate to, somewhat teasingly, put the whole struggle within the larger context of the then-nascent Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union.

“Bill Gaines read about the pending hearings and fumed. ‘Bill believed in his heart that he was on the side of freedom and right and had nothing to fear.’ In a fit of prankish fury, Gaines dug out his file of oddball newspaper clips about comics, and he used a couple of items as the basis of a house ad intended both to parody comic-book critics and to mobilize EC readers against them... The headline on top of the page asked, in tall block letters, ‘ARE YOU A RED DUPE?’ Below it, a sequence of three comic book drawings showed (a) a Soviet citizen printing a comic book (*Panicky*); (b) a KGB officer stomping apart the printing press; (c) the citizen hanging from a noose, dead, while the officer warms his hands in a bonfire of comics. The text below read ‘Here in America, we can STILL publish comic magazines, newspapers, slicks, books and the Bible. We don’t HAVE to send them to a censor first. Not YET...’”²²

Gaines’s ad also made sure to say

“in a second headline: THE GROUP MOST ANXIOUS TO DESTROY COMICS ARE THE COMMUNISTS! As evidence, Gaines submitted an excerpt from an item in the July 13, 1953 issue of the *Daily Worker*, which condemned ‘so-called ‘comics’ [for] brutalizing American youth.’... At the bottom, the ad concluded: ‘So the NEXT time some joker gets up at a P.T.A meeting, or starts jabbering about the ‘naughty comic books’ at your local candy store, give him the ONCE-OVER. We’re not saying he IS a Communist! He may be innocent of the whole thing! He may be a DUPE! He may not even READ the ‘Daily Worker’! It’s just that he’s SWALLOWED the RED BAIT...HOOK, LINE, AND SINKER!’”²³

Of course, Gaines was being cheeky, as was his wont, but it certainly could not be denied that he was raising a frighteningly cogent point: the push to ban books and implement censorship was not dissimilar to something that could have happened in the Soviet system, albeit without any executions.

Of course, the pro-regulation forces were not amused by Gaines’s comparison of

²¹ Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2008), 74-75.

²² Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 251-252.

²³ Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 252-253.

them to the Soviet regime. But Gaines's anxieties were not unfounded. In the hysteria whipped up by Wertham, freedom of speech was coming under implicit attack. The *TIME* article notes that:

“in Oklahoma City, the city council recently passed an ordinance banning crime and horror comics. Some council members opposed the ordinance on the ground that the wording was so vague it could be used to ban the writings of Edgar Allan Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle. In Houston, spurred by Page One editorials in *Jesse Jones's Chronicle*, the city council also passed an ordinance similar to Oklahoma City's.”²⁴

The frenzy that had been infecting the media since the late 1940's was also occurring north of the border. Coville notes that “Also in 1949, The Canadian Government enacted a broad law that sought to control 'crime' comics (any comics that dealt with crime, which included Superhero comics).”²⁵ Gaines's battle to defend comic books had indeed become a battle not just to protect a staple of American culture, but to defend the American idea of free speech from overzealous and fear-mongering politicians.

But distributors, especially EC's weak distributor Leader News, began to express reluctance to continue carrying the beleaguered titles due to the mounting pressure. In desperation, EC Comics business manager Lyle Stuart suggested a different strategy:

“[Stuart] encouraged Gaines to fight the polemical battle over comics with more and better polemics. Stuart suggested that Gaines try to build a coalition of comics publishers; it could fund authoritative research to disprove Wertham's charges and conduct a public-relations campaign to restore confidence in all comic books, including EC's.”²⁶

The comics publishers indeed did come to the meeting. But once they were there, they proposed something that horrified Gaines. They formed the Comics Magazine Association of America, and took steps found draconian:

²⁴ *TIME Magazine*, “Horror on the Newsstands.”

²⁵ “Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books,” http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html.

²⁶ Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 284.

“[T]hey decided, as one of their first orders of business, to reestablish a new code of standards for comic-book content, along with a system of enforcement to be directed by an unimpeachable independent overseer. The officers of the group agreed to offer the position to Fredric Wertham, and they began hammering out the terms of their content code. Among the early recommendations were prohibitions on the words ‘horror’ and ‘terror’ in comic book titles. Bill Gaines, the publisher of *The Vault of Horror* and *The Crypt of Terror*, rose from his seat. He said, ‘This is not what I had in mind,’ and he walked out.”²⁷

But the new association went forward with its plans anyway, and it found a magistrate from New York named Charles F. Murphy—who specialized in juvenile delinquency—to be the head of the organization. Murphy used his power to create the Comics Code Authority, which imposed strict bans against the illustration of skimpy clothing, depictions of violence, limited the use of undead creatures such as vampires or zombies, and banned the words “horror” and “terror”, among other restrictions. It was also stated that policemen, judges, and other authority figures were to be presented as unfailingly authoritative and unambiguously good (as a magistrate, Murphy likely relished this particular provision). The private gentleman’s agreement of censorship that was put into action in the comic book industry was very similar to the previous private gentleman’s agreement between movie houses known as the Hays Code—a development that will be explored in the next chapter—in the sense that the censors had found a way to censor the industry’s content without direct government action.

Depressed and disgusted by the new restrictions, Gaines walked away from the horror comic business. He prepared a statement, saying “‘I have decided now to discontinue all horror and crime comics. This decision will be put into immediate effect.’ Gaines took a

²⁷ Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 285-86.

couple of the EC comics from the rack on his desk and tore them apart.”²⁸ The tight-fisted reign of the CCA had begun.

The worst of the CCA’s reign took place during the Silver Age of Comics (considered to roughly cover the years from 1957 to 1970), during which—arguably as a result of the restrictions on darker content—comics began being stuck with corny or light elements that unfortunately colored the Baby Boomer generation’s perception of comic books. This was the era during which ABC’s horrifically-campy *Batman* television series took to the airwaves, presenting the public with a goofy Caped Crusader having wacky misadventures in a lighthearted, cheerful Gotham City. Batman’s grim and dark early stories were seemingly thrown out the window, Gotham’s dark and eponymously gothic environment was turned into a goofy and sunny place, and Batman’s entire grim ethos was buried under onomatopoeic “BAM!” and “WHOOSH!” captions appearing on the screen following each fake-looking punch. Robin’s cheesy “Holy [whatever], Batman!” lines did not help matters either. And quite tellingly, the creators of the 60’s *Batman* series later said that their view of Batman and Robin was informed by Wertham’s report. Meanwhile, the Hanna-Barbera animation studio was heavily influenced by this take on superheroics when they created their series of *Superfriends* cartoons, featuring a campy version of the Justice League of America, in which Batman and Robin were carbon-copies of their depiction on the 60’s *Batman* series and indeed all the heroes seemed to share the same wooden personality. The series also had the unfortunate effect of ruining the public’s perception of Aquaman up till the present day.

The then up-and-coming Baby Boomer generation thus grew up with an unfortunate view of superheroes as being campy and goofy, a far cry from the more dynamic stories that

²⁸ Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague*, 287.

had been in place before the CCA's reign began. This ended up feeding the perception that anyone who was a comic book fan must either be a child or a socially-maladjusted adult. Comics and superheroes were alive, but they were seen as something not to be taken seriously as an artform...meaning that the cultural elites had won a major victory in the war against pop culture. Unfortunately, these stereotypes about superheroes, comics and comic book fans would persist until the next generation.

And yet, the seeds of rebellion soon bloomed in the comics industry, as writers and artists found ways to skirt the CCA's restrictions, at first in subtle ways but later in ways that were far bolder. And eventually, even the overseers of the CCA began easing restrictions on comic books' content. The Silver Age was finally shattered into a million little pieces with the Green Goblin's brutal murder of Spider-Man's then-girlfriend Gwen Stacy in an ending that no one saw coming (the writers even saved the issue's title, "The Night Gwen Stacy Died", for the very last page of that week's book in order to surprise readers). In 1970—in a now-legendary run—classic DC Comics heroes Green Lantern and Green Arrow were teamed up by writer Denny O'Neil and illustrator Neal Adams in a very intentionally socially conscious series of adventures that dealt with such issues as drug addiction (Green Arrow's own sidekick Speedy ends up battling his biggest enemy yet: a heroin addiction, with the help of his mentor, as well as Green Lantern). These stories featured Green Arrow as a bombastic liberal activist and Green Lantern as a conservative law-and-order Silent Majority type, and despite their political differences, the two worked together as teammates and best friends, confronting both crime and sociopolitical issues along the way. In an era when Norman Lear was exploring the sociopolitical issues in American life with his slate of TV

shows, DC Comics was addressing the very same themes in the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* team-up series.

The cultural and societal impact of comic books continued to grow. In 1972, feminist leader Gloria Steinem emblazoned Wonder Woman on the front page of *Ms.* magazine's inaugural issue, with the title "Wonder Woman for President." While Wertham had questioned Wonder Woman's status as a suitable exemplar for girls, America's leading feminist of the 70's had boldly affirmed Diana's ability to be a positive role model not just for young girls, but for the empowered women of the new era.

The CCA's rough-fitting chastity belt of restrictions began to crumble like the old Victorian social mores that had collapsed at Coney Island almost a century earlier. In 1980, the now-legendary comic book creator Frank Miller asked the higher-ups at Marvel if they would let him take over writing duties on *Daredevil*. Daredevil had always been considered a minor character, but Miller saw great potential in his backstory and iconography. As a young boy, Matt Murdock—blue collar denizen of Manhattan's roughneck Hell's Kitchen neighborhood—had been blinded by a radioactive isotope spilled from an out-of-control truck that was illegally moving toxic waste through Manhattan. But the isotope elevated his other senses to superhuman levels. After his boxer father was killed after refusing to throw a fight at the behest of a mob boss, Matt vowed to fight for justice, and grew up to be a pro-bono lawyer by day (often accepting minor gifts like fish or sports equipment in lieu of payment from his poverty-stricken clientele) and vigilante by night. Frank Miller saw great potential in such a character, and delved deep into the dilemmas that would be involved in a life such as that. He also expanded on Matt's Irish Catholic roots and made Matt's crises of faith and Catholic guilt a recurring part of the character, and managed to weave fascinating

Roman Catholic theological themes into the stories without either endorsing *or* bashing them (Miller is an atheist, and merely found Matt Murdock's Irish Catholic background to be a potentially rich source of thematic material and plots; he was right).

Miller's run on *Daredevil* dealt with themes and stories such as the death of Elektra, one of Daredevil's love interests and occasional fighting partner, crises of faith, the discovery that Matt's mother was secretly still alive and working as a nun, social themes, and even a storyline in which one of Daredevil's girlfriends became a heroin addict and pornographic film star as her life fell apart. The fallout of this was a grandiose story arc in which, she—in a fit of desperation—sold Matt's secret identity in exchange for a fix of heroin, and the information made its way to Daredevil's archnemesis, the arch-powerful mob boss known as the Kingpin. Miller then boldly tread into territory that had scarcely been covered in such horrifying detail: the fallout of a superhero's archnemesis discovering his identity. Kingpin systematically deconstructed and destroyed Matt Murdock's life, losing him his job, arranging false charges that caused the IRS to freeze his assets, destroying his home, pressuring his allies, and finally attempting to kill him only after driving him to the brink of madness. Throughout most of the story, Matt appears only in (increasingly shabby) street clothes: this was Matt Murdock's *personal* opera. Only at the end when he's clawing his way back towards vengeance does he finally recover his Daredevil outfit and swing back into action as the Man Without Fear, as he is known. And in the end, Daredevil's final assault on Kingpin doesn't involve fighting him physically (he'd tried and failed at that earlier in the story), but...another method, that gives Daredevil some measure of vengeance. The story was groundbreaking, and proved to a new generation that comic books held indisputable power as a medium for intense psychological storytelling. Miller would go on to pen stories

at a similar level of high drama in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *Sin City*, and other great works.

The cultural influence of comic books continued to bubble just beneath the surface of much of the indifferent mainstream media's awareness, but gradually burst back onto the mainstream scene in a major way towards the end of the twentieth century and even moreso at the dawn of the twenty-first. The 1990's and early 2000's saw many DC Comics characters being adapted by animators Bruce Timm and Paul Dini into a line of well-written animated series (beginning with *Batman: The Animated Series* and culminating in *Justice League Unlimited*) that introduced a new generation of fans to Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and other classic DC characters. Most compellingly, the heroes were faced with richly complex, sometimes-scary, and often morally-ambiguous dilemmas that would have made the 50's era prohibitionists' heads spin. The year 2000 saw the release of the first live-action *X-Men* movie, launching a new era of big-budget superhero movies that arguably have contributed to an expanding fanbase for the characters and a vastly greater acceptance of comic books as an integral part of American culture. In the era of *Superfriends* and the ABC *Batman* series, comic book fans had become freaks in the eyes of many media figures and comedians. But today, the only comedians you're likely to see making jokes about comic book fans are aging and outdated comedians from previous generations (although many of them having stopped this line of attack), bewildered by the changed cultural landscape in which comic book fans and superheroes are no longer seen as corny targets of ridicule, due to the fact that quite arguably the *majority* of Americans are now fans of these characters, and openly so. Marvel Comics impresario Stan Lee, once a "who's that?" figure, is now one of the most famous and beloved figures in America. The industry is revitalized and is now

respected by the majority as an artform (although many cultural elites still refuse to entertain the very idea), and comics-based movies are among the most profitable in history.

Today, the San Diego Comic Con—the largest and most important of the many comic conventions going on in America, the Western world in general, and Japan—celebrates comic books and the characters born within their pages. It has also expanded to celebrate the movies and television programming featuring these iconic characters, as well as sci-fi movies and TV in general. A tagline on materials at Comic Con gives a perfect summary of their focus: “Celebrating the popular arts.” A perfect tagline for Comic Con, and a perfect phrase—“the popular arts”—to describe the media of American pop culture (and, of course, a phrase that would surely infuriate those who mistakenly see “popular” and “arts” as mutually exclusive things).

Chapter 4: Movies, Television, and the Internet

If the overall conflict between American pop culture and cultural snobs can be characterized as a battle, then the mass media are perhaps the most ferocious battlefield of them all. Perhaps it is the ubiquity of movies and television that has resulted in their nature being subject to the most contention. The level of heated debate that often accompanies movies and television could result in a firestorm. There are those critics—both foreign and domestic—who accuse them of spreading immorality, who deride them as not being “true” culture, and those who accept some of them as “true” culture but reject most of the rest as improper and unworthy.

This was true of movies as a whole during the early part of the twentieth century.

Paul Starr writes that:

“The early development of the motion pictures of the 1890s and their rapid growth after 1900 were subject to the same dynamic tensions as the rise of the other popular media between the Civil War and World War I. America’s transformation into a more diverse, urbanized, industrial society energized and propelled both the burgeoning market for the movies and the anxious reaction that developed against them.”¹

Thus we see that like the rise of organized athletics, amusement parks, and the shape of urban design during the same period, a popular movement was met with resistance by certain forces. Starr elaborates that:

“During their first two decades, the motion pictures in America had a primarily urban, working-class audience drawn heavily from new immigrant groups, and the movie industry itself, after an initial phase in the hands of men of Anglo-Protestant descent, soon came under the control of immigrant entrepreneurs, most of them Jewish. The United States did not originally dominate international film production; before World War I, the leading role belonged to the French. But as immigrants generally lent a new vitality to American culture, so they imparted it to motion pictures, by the end of the war turning the production center they built in Hollywood into the world’s movie capital.”²

¹ Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 295.

² Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 295.

But now of course comes the part where Eliot-style cultural elites assert themselves once more: “A variety of religious, social-reform, and other groups, however, saw the movies as a seductive and all-too-popular source of moral subversion and, beginning in 1907, persuaded some municipalities and states to censor the new medium.”³ Starr also writes that

“In New York the day before Christmas 1908, Mayor George B. McClellan, Jr., closed the city’s more than 600 nickelodeons, requiring them to reapply for licenses under new rules that would bar them from opening on Sundays and from showing movies that tended to ‘degrade or injure the morals of the community.’”⁴

Mayor McClellan’s Grinch-like gesture—on Christmas Eve no less—was part of the larger pattern of elitism and censorship that fueled the other hysterical campaigns against popular culture. Unfortunately, the then-current Supreme Court Justices were lackluster in their defense of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

“As the Supreme Court generally took a narrow view of free-speech rights at this time, so it upheld governmental censorship of motion pictures, ruling in 1915 that the movies lay outside the sphere of constitutionally protected free expression. As a result, not only did officials, primarily at the state and local level, gain authority to screen and censor movies; the motion-picture industry also subjected itself to privately organized censorship in the hope of preventing more comprehensive and stringent legislation.”⁵

Indeed, that self-subjected censorship taken on by the movie industry occurred once the production houses had been secured by men who viewed themselves as cultural gatekeepers. Tim Wu writes in his fascinating work *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* about how Daniel Lord, a youthful Jesuit priest, rose to become the head of a plot to enforce a puritanical code of censorship on Hollywood, apparently in yet another attempt to supposedly protect the people. Gradually, these paternalistic would-be saviors of culture realized that the best way to censor Hollywood would be from within.

“Indeed, the Catholic enforcers were astute to realize that in a democracy, official censorship could never be as effective as private. Officials, if they could be prevailed

³ Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 296.

⁴ Starr, 306.

⁵ Starr, *The Creation of the Media*, 296.

upon to act at all, would act after the fact, and then it would be up to law enforcement, an inherently imperfect enterprise, to make the rules stick. The three men reasoned that if they wanted their Christian values...to be upheld, they would have to find a way of restraining the film industry themselves.”⁶

Wu also notes that these Catholic enforcers were quite consciously attempting to censor the very industry that Starr had noted was a voice for the Jewish immigrants during that time period: “More directly, Breen would declare himself the one man ‘who could cram decent ethics down the throats of the Jews.’”⁷ The anti-Semitic sentiment in the movement was blatant, as was their desire to thwart pop culture.

The plot culminated in this cabal succeeding in taking charge of various movie production houses and essentially coming to a gentleman’s agreement on how to take the supposed “immorality” out of the movies. The studio houses—now dominated by like-minded individuals who all sought the same vision of Victorian-style morality—put into place a code that placed restrictions on the type of content that movies could display, censoring the type of violence or sexuality that could be seen. It became known as the Hays Code, named after Will H. Hays, the first head of the office in charge of enforcing the code. Thus, it becomes apparent that—contrary to the nostalgic belief held by many that movies were more genteel and Victorian in the black-and-white era due to it being a more “moral” time—movies were simply genteel and Victorian in nature due to the private censorship imposed on the movie industry by a few committed ideologues. Ye Good Olde Days where the movie public’s tastes were “clean” are largely a façade, a myth fabricated by the Hays Code application of yore, combined with a modern penchant for nostalgia towards older movies. Today, many would-be morality warriors who loathe modern pop culture often

⁶ Wu, 117.

⁷ Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 117.

wistfully hearken back to those days, and wonder why today's movies no longer seem as Victorian as the movies of earlier eras; they might be surprised to discover that those movies were genteel and clean not because of any public demand, but merely due to artificial tampering from staid ideologues; and once the Code was finally lifted in 1968, the public was all too happy to reward movies that treated them as adults and allowed them to enjoy exciting scenes of violent action and morally-complex plots that made them think. The final defeat of the Hays Code was the removal of a major obstacle in the path of American pop culture. Its removal was a victory for freedom of thought and freedom of expression. The removal of the stodgy Hays Code was also a victory for those who desired more exciting drama, and the now-freed moviemakers were quite eager to begin filling in this space in the market over the next ten years with new movies such as the *Godfather* trilogy. And the decade after that saw the blossoming of a golden age of action movies, starring icons such as Sylvester Stallone, much to the disgust of stodgy, insufferable movie snobs who despised action movies, who decried the entire genre as being “lowbrow.”

Movies in general were viewed as “lowbrow” entertainment during the industry's first few decades. Lawrence Levine discusses how the *Nation*—not long after the period when it had castigated football—pooh-poohed the idea of movies existing as an artform, and explicitly uses the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” to characterize stage theater and movies respectively. Levine writes that one of its 1913 articles was particularly snobbish:

“observing that while in the world of the theater the subject of ‘technique’ was one for ‘professionals and highbrows,’ in the world of the movie it was a subject for the masses: ‘The crowd discusses the technique of the moving-picture theatre with as much interest as literary salons in Paris or London discuss the minutiae of the higher drama,’ ...Significantly, the *Nation* concluded by negating the interesting point it had just made, reminding readers that movies were ‘not a very high art,’ that they revealed ‘the

common predilection of the popular taste for the lurid and the fantastic,’ and required ‘no thought and little attention.’”⁸

The *Nation*’s bed-wetting over “the common predilection of the popular taste for the lurid and the fantastic,” when put in context, feels like an eerie precursor of the kind of sentiment stirred up by Frederic Wertham and his ilk decades later against comic books.

In any case, the elite disdain for speculative fiction was tied strongly into the aforementioned belief that they didn’t provoke thought in viewers. Never mind the fact that movies with fantastic subjects generally engage the imaginations of moviegoers, making them wonder about the possibilities and implications of various supernatural or sci-fi scenarios. Indeed, many of the most thought-provoking scenarios involve plot elements that can only be posed in a sci-fi/fantasy setting, thus making the genre arguably the most endlessly fascinating in the opinion of many. Yet there were and are many movie snobs who insist on looking down their noses at the genre.

Indeed, even as movies—a genre that had formerly been despised—achieved respectability, only *certain types* of movies were considered acceptable by the cultural gatekeepers. Again, most action, science fiction, or superhero movies were automatically considered crass and unworthy for consumption. The word “blockbuster”—though originally just a descriptor for a movie that was tremendously successful—is often used almost as a pejorative by certain classes of movie snobs to dismiss any popular work. Popular movies were (and in the minds of many movie snobs, still *are*) considered unacceptable forms of entertainment, inadmissible as artworks, and seen as catering to a supposedly lesser class of moviegoer, with the unsubtle and self-aggrandizing implication being that those who shun popular movies and cater to more “highbrow” (there’s that word again) movies are

⁸ Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*, 231-232.

conversely a somehow superior class of moviegoer. The snobbish emotions behind such attitudes can be seen as a continuation of the attitudes held by Eliot, Olmsted, Wertham, and other cultural gatekeepers about other elements of American pop culture.

However, popular movies occasionally can gain a veneer of respectability among movie snobs with increasing age. Movies that were popular in their day can still gain critical acclaim after enough decades pass. In the minds of many, black-and-white movies, as a category, are sacrosanct, and constitute the bulk of “true art” in the movie industry, to the point where—while many will consider you a barbarian for liking *current* popular movies—one may be considered a barbarian for *not* liking certain popular movies from the 1940’s.

And black-and-white movies, in the minds of many, could never be tampered with. Levine notes that “As cultural categories softened and overlapped, formerly despised genres began to be conceived and spoken of in tones once limited to more ethereal expressive forms. Thus when computer technology made it possible to transform old black-and-white movies into colored movies, a coalition of outraged directors, screen writers, theatrical unions, cinematographers, and critics denounced the development as ‘barbarism.’”⁹ Thus the traditional, knee-jerk hatred of anything new in culture continued unabated. And arguably the reason this impulse is so strong in discussions of movies is due to the strength of the “nostalgia filter” effect.

Many a movie snob has opined about the black-and-white era of moviemaking as a bygone golden age of sophistication, where every single actor was a master at their craft, every movie a classic, and every script an example of “true art” that modern cinema could never hope to live up to. But arguably the problem with this view of movie history is that if

⁹ Levine, 248.

one were to actually re-watch an *entire* batch of movies from a year in, say, the 1940's or '50's by going down a list of movies released that year without focusing only on the most remembered ones, it would become apparent that not every actor was as authoritative as Spencer Tracy, not every actress was as sophisticated as Audrey Hepburn, and some scripts were quite terrible. Arguably the reason the nostalgia filter exists is because the majority of current viewers have been raised in a time where the black-and-white era is distant enough that the good and great movies of that time period are the *only* movies that usually get remembered, while the movies of lesser quality from that era have faded into obscurity due to the passage of time. This mnemonic phenomenon essentially creates an illusion that the filmography of that time period consisted almost entirely of well-written classics like *Casablanca*, *Twelve Angry Men*, or *Dr. Strangelove*. When channels such as Turner Classic Movies devote marathons to the works of the best actors of the period they are implicitly leaving out the worst. What a modern viewer sees when they tune into a nostalgia channel is not a full representation of the era, but a highlight reel, a sort of “best of the best” countdown.

And as a result, black-and-white movies have retroactively become considered almost a unified genre unto themselves—lumped together regardless of differences in subject matter—and been anointed as an integral part of “highbrow” culture. Thus, many people who wish to be accepted as “sophisticated” will often cite their profound love of black-and-white cinema as proof of their erudition, and will quickly rattle off a clichéd line about how “they’re so much better than the movies today,” and then wait for the person they are addressing to nod approvingly. Generally once the person they are addressing accepts this as confirmation that the speaker is “like me,” some sort of shared put-down about “the masses”

that go to see superhero movies or action thrillers immediately follows, as part and parcel of the social bonding process.

It is essentially another way for such people to indulge in some old-fashioned “Us vs. Them” snobbery. This is indeed the very same phenomenon observed by David Brooks wherein the elite bohemian cliques, embittered by the middle class’s lack of automatic adoration for their works, became enraged at the middle class and lashed out by sneering at the average citizen’s cultural tastes. Thus, taste in movies becomes a rank of cultural status in the minds of certain people.

This effect was in evidence as early as the 1970’s, when movie critic Pauline Kael—darling of the “highbrow” circles—crusaded against Clint Eastwood, particularly against his Dirty Harry character and what he represented. For Kael, Dirty Harry—and by extension Eastwood himself—and his fans were fascist. Kael—who once famously gave a speech in which she admitted how limited her social clique was, famously relating for example that nobody *she* knew—save for one lone soul—had voted for Richard Nixon (in a year in which the still-popular Nixon won by a landslide nationally)—continually growled about Eastwood, and later sneered that her most favorite part of her career had been the columns where she got to attack Clint Eastwood. Mr. Eastwood, reflecting back in a 2008 interview with MTV.com, remarked that he always thought Kael was taking things way too far. MTV’s interviewer, Josh Horowitz, referring to *Dirty Harry*, asks Eastwood ““Did it always strike you as something that could be controversial?””, to which Eastwood replied

““I was told when I first got the script that other actors had liked it but had reservations about the political elements of it. But even at that age, I was not afraid of it. To me, it

was an exciting detective story. It was a fantasy. Here's a guy who is so dogmatic that nothing is going to stop him when his mind is made up.”¹⁰

Horowitz presses further and remarks ““But it was more than a little controversy. The pre-eminent film critic of the time, Pauline Kael, called it ‘a Gestapo movie,’” to which Eastwood replies:

““I didn't care less. Somebody else called it a fascist masterpiece. People are always calling people names, the great right-wing conspiracy or the great left-wing conspiracy. You make a movie, and if somebody reads something into it, then great, more power to him. [Director] Don Siegel and I were both very moderate politically. We didn't think much of it. We just had a good time with it.”¹¹

The thing that probably disgusted Kael and her ilk the most was the fact that Dirty Harry was a character who seemed to symbolize the growing revolt against the bohemian aesthetic of the late 1960's, a revolt that was brewing by the end of the decade and into the 1970's when the first “Dirty Harry” movie blasted its way onto the big screen: the revolt of the Silent Majority as Nixon called them, a sort of counter-counterculture. Another character who seemed to symbolize the growing middle class resentment of the bohemians was Archie Bunker of Norman Lear's classic sitcom “All in the Family.” Lear *intended* for Bunker to be seen as always wrong, and Bunker's actor—the late great Carroll O'Connor—always viewed Archie as being a victim of the views he espoused. But to many TV viewers at home, Archie, while overly-crusty and often taking things too far, still seemed more relatable than his eternally-smug hippie son-in-law Mike Stivic, who Lear had *thought* the audience would sympathize with. At the very least, Archie—while often taking things to the point that many audience members would disagree with—still seemed to have a heart of gold underneath

¹⁰ “Clint Eastwood on Dirty Harry,” last modified June 23, 2008, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1589746/clint-eastwood-reveals-how-ended-up-dirty-harry.jhtml>.

¹¹ “Clint Eastwood on Dirty Harry.”

(and consequently became one of the most popular character on television, remaining so to this day), while Mike just came across as being full of himself. Characters like these frustrated the bohemian circles Pauline Kael lived in, and seemed to symbolize the middle class's stubborn rejection of bohemian values.

Of course, the bohemian class attempted to fire a volley back, creating movies such as "Taxi Driver" in which the hard hat-style character—the eponymous cabbie, who loathes hippies and the counterculture in general—is portrayed as being a murderous psychopath. There was a similar theme in "Joe." Even in more recent times, the hatred for movie vigilantes that bohemians acquired in the 1970's remains unabated. When Jodie Foster—certainly no Archie Bunker in real life—came out with a vigilante movie called "The Brave One" in 2007, there were those movie reviewers who viewed the movie with disdain entirely because of its premise.

The disdain for vigilante movies is symptomatic of the larger critical disdain for action movies in general by the film snob community. The *Rocky* and *Die Hard* series and their stars Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis have often been mocked by this crowd. The 1980's saw the rise of many high-octane action movies thanks to improved pyrotechnics and special effects, and the 1990's saw a resurgence of classic disaster movies, thanks to computer generated imagery finally becoming sophisticated enough to translate the imagination into more effective imagery. Both developments were mocked hysterically by movie snobs who despised popular movies, and many of these people predictably invoked the nostalgia filter as they melodramatically yearned for the pre-CGI days of yore.

In more recent times, Christopher Nolan's epic-scale Batman movie trilogy featured deep—often dark—psychological themes, exciting action sequences, strong characterization,

compelling plotlines, and gripping acting performances, most notably by the late Heath Ledger in his role as the iconic Joker, Batman's anarchistic and existentialist archnemesis. *The Dark Knight* in particular—the movie that featured Ledger—was hailed by fans as a masterpiece and one of the most compelling movies of the year, and became one of the highest-grossing movies of all time. And logically, after all of the positives of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*, one would expect the movie community to greet the trilogy, especially *The Dark Knight*, with applause and that such well-crafted cinema would garner many awards. But one would apparently be wrong.

The *Los Angeles Times* describes (in a story appearing in its online Hero Complex section as well as the Calendar section the following day) how *The Dark Knight* simply never had a chance against the Powers That Be in the Academy when it came down to award time. According to Geoff Boucher, Nolan's movie faced a steep uphill battle to win the approval of members of the notoriously "stuffy academy" for the best picture category. Boucher writes that "no superhero move has come close to the marquee category in the past."¹² One can see that the traditionalist disdain for comic books and towards comic book characters is still a sentiment that various cultural gatekeepers cling to stubbornly, even as the rest of American society has embraced comic book characters as mainstream icons (then again, the elite disdain for comic book characters is likely *strengthened* by the mass culture's embrace of them, as the elite bohemian class seek to further differentiate themselves from the public at large).

Indeed, Heath Ledger ultimately won the award for Best Actor, but one grimly suspects that the only reason the Academy decided to relent from its usual disdain for

¹² "The Dark Knight Snubbed in Best Picture Race," last modified January, 22, 2009, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2009/01/22/the-dark-knight/>.

popular superhero movies and grant Ledger his due recognition was because of his untimely death and the en masse calls—from both the public and the acting community—for Ledger to receive the recognition that he had earned, as well as the fact that he had previously starred in movies that had been treated more favorably by critics and the members of the Academy.

Boucher quotes Hollywood producer Michael London (a producer of *Milk* and *The Visitor*) as saying;

“‘People were surprised ‘The Reader’ got the fifth slot instead of ‘Dark Knight’... That seemed to be the biggest surprise. People are talking about it. I don’t know what it means. I love ‘The Dark Knight.’ It was a *fantastic* movie, but I suppose it’s difficult for successful popcorn movies to get serious attention from the academy. It’s a knee-jerk thing where smaller movies are perceived as more artistic.’”¹³

Once again, the bohemian doctrine of distaste towards any cultural product enjoyed by the middle class majority rears its head. And the sad thing is, to reiterate Lawrence Levine’s thesis, *it does not have to be this way*. The compellingly-gifted British actor Tom Hiddleston—who has made a name for himself as Loki in the Marvel Cinematic Universe of superhero movies as well as by doing much-lauded performances of Shakespeare’s dramas—writes that critics should not shun superhero movies or underestimate their storytelling power. Hiddleston recounts:

“Earlier this year, beneath the wind-whipped tarpaulin of a catering tent in Gloucester, I was working on a film with the actor Malcolm Sinclair. Over scrambled eggs at an ungodly hour, he told me something I had not previously known: when Christopher Reeve was young, barely out of Juilliard, he was roundly mocked by his peers on Broadway for accepting the role of Superman. It was considered an ignoble thing for a classical actor to do.”¹⁴

¹³ “The Dark Knight Snubbed in Best Picture Race.”

¹⁴ “Superheroes movies like Avengers Assemble should not be Scorned,” last modified April, 19, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2012/apr/19/avengers-assemble-tom-hiddleston-superhero>.

Sadly, in an era when an entire generation's views of superheroes had been poisoned by the cultural elites' imposed ban on darker stories through the CCA, it was gloomily unsurprising. Hiddleston passionately writes:

“Superhero movies also represent the pinnacle of cinema as ‘motion picture’. I'd like to think that the Lumière brothers would thrill at the cat-and-mouse chase through the netherworld streets of Gotham in *The Dark Knight*, with helicopters tripping on high-tensile wires and falling from the sky, and a huge Joker-driven triple-length truck upending 180 degrees like a Russian acrobat. I hope that they would cheer and delight at the rollercoaster ride through the skies of Manhattan at the end of *Avengers Assemble*. These scenes are the result of a creative engine set in motion when the Lumières shot *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat* in 1895. The trains just move a lot faster these days. And not just trains; trucks, bikes, bat-mobiles and men in flying, shining iron suits. The spectacle is part of the fun – part of the art, part of our shared joy.”¹⁵

Indeed, the spectacle represents movie-making at the peak of both its technical ability, and its ability to incorporate all genres into one. Superhero movies generally present viewers with a blend of action, romance, horror, suspense, mystery, and sometimes period piece elements, all wrapped up in a scenario that exercises the imagination and treats viewers to a spectacular panorama of painstakingly-crafted special effects that represent the pinnacle of technical expertise.

The sacralization of media that Lawrence Levine speaks of also occurs in discussions about television programming. The television programming that one chooses to watch will often get drafted into an assigned position in the army of one sociopolitical faction or another in the culture wars. In an article for *TIME Magazine*, television columnist James Poniewozik opens by noting:

“Woody Guthrie’s ‘This Land is Your Land,’ written in 1940, tells us that every American has a claim on all of America: cities and deserts, wheat fields and skyscrapers. What a quaint notion. Today we talk more in terms of your America and my America—from Sarah Palin, who praised the ‘pro-America areas’ of the country, to Kevin Smith,

¹⁵ “Superheroes movies like *Avengers Assemble* should not be Scorned.”

who directed *Red State*, a horror movie about a fundamentalist nut job in flyover country.”¹⁶

Thus, there are often geographic and ideological divisions in the American TV audience. Indeed, liking a particular TV show is seen as affirmation of certain values or ideals by many. If one enjoys *24*, for instance, there are those who will accuse one of being torture-happy or something along those lines, ignoring the fact that *24* is widely regarded as one of the most well-paced, intricately-written dramas in the history of television. And many popular shows are shunned by cultural snobs, who just as in the movie arena, put on pretentious airs when it comes to selection of which television programs to watch.

And yet, there are shows that endeavor to bring us all together. In the *TIME* article quoted above, the author discusses how NBC’s *Friday Night Lights*—set in small town Texas—has universal themes that bring together Americans of all regions and stripes. For one thing, it’s (partially) about football. In a nicely-done scene, Coach Taylor tries to recruit a new student to the football team. The student claims that football embodies all the worst aspects of American culture, including aggression. Coach Taylor counters that football teaches one to *channel* aggression into something positive. It teaches teamwork. It teaches personal development. Coach Taylor sounded a lot like Teddy Roosevelt in his letter to Endicott Peabody. But in general, the themes of the series are universal, and even those who are not football fans can enjoy the subtleties and emotional growth of the characters. Truly a great example of a popular television show achieving great narrative accomplishments.

And of course, there are some who shun television altogether, derisively referring to it as the “boob tube” or “idiot box” (a not-so-subtle jab at the average TV viewer and another instance of the bohemian disdain for popular arts and entertainment). The familiar

¹⁶ James Poniewozik, “Farewell to FNL”, *TIME Magazine*, Feb 14, 2011, accessed July 6, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2046052,00.html>.

denunciations of television usually claim that it is somehow dumbing down the population. But in his amusingly-titled book *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, psychological writer Steven Johnson asserts that “popular television shows...have also increased the cognitive work they demand from their audience, exercising the mind in ways that would have been unheard of thirty years ago.”¹⁷

Johnson is under no illusions that scholars will immediately accept his claim, and indeed acknowledges that it will seem unbelievable to some. “For someone loosely following the debate over the medium’s cultural impact, the idea that television is actually improving our minds will sound like apostasy.”¹⁸ He then references Newton Minnow’s “famous ‘vast wasteland’ speech” in which “he described the content of current television programming as a ‘procession of...blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder’—this in the era of Andy Griffith, Perry Como, and Uncle Miltie.”¹⁹ One can imagine that snobbish contemporaries of Minnow—such as Dr. Wertham—must have been nodding vigorously when he made his ridiculous speech. The smiling and friendly Sheriff Andy Taylor and little Beaver Cleaver were apparently too much for people like Minnow to handle. One can only imagine that Eddie Haskell probably gave the scandalized Minnow the vapors.

But Johnson dares to take on the bohemian anti-TV crowd, and points out television’s increasing benefits...from a psychological and neuroscientific perspective (take that, Dr. Wertham). Johnson points out that television, while more passive than video games (another much-maligned pop cultural phenomenon which he defends), still require viewers to think,

¹⁷ Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 62.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, 62.

¹⁹ Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, 63.

and that TV programs have been requiring this in an ever-increasing amount of cognition over the past several decades.

“Part of that cognitive work comes from following multiple threads, keeping often closely interwoven plotlines distinct in your head as you watch. But another part involves the viewer’s ‘filling in’: making sense of information that has been either deliberately withheld or deliberately left obscure. Narratives that require that their viewers fill in crucial elements take that complexity to a more demanding level.”²⁰

And that’s not all. Johnson notes:

“another kind of televised intelligence is on the rise. Recall the cognitive benefits conventionally ascribed to reading: attention, patience, retention, the parsing of narrative threads. Over the last half century of television’s dominance over mass culture, programming on TV has steadily increased the demands it places on precisely these mental faculties. The nature of the medium is such that television will never improve its viewers’ skills at translating letters into meaning, and it may not activate the imagination in the same way that a purely textual form does. But for all the other modes of mental exercise associated with reading, television is growing increasingly rigorous. And the pace is accelerating—thanks to changes in the economics of the television business, and to changes in the technology we rely on to watch...the shows that made the most demands on their audience have also turned out to be among the most lucrative in television history.”²¹

Indeed, shows such as *The West Wing*, *24*, *Lost*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Supernatural*, *Suits*, and other shows have increasingly added complexity to the familiar palette of the average TV viewer. The marketplace for entertainment—though scorned by the bohemian class ever since they were separated from their aristocratic patrons and thrown into it, as described by Brooks—has rewarded the networks and the creators behind such shows. Each of the shows listed above—and many more well-written classics—have gained immense followings and devoted fanbases.

Television is not a stupid or inferior medium. It is a revolutionary medium that makes many narrative devices and educational paradigms possible. It does not stimulate the brain in the same way that reading does, but it does in fact stimulate the brain, just in different ways.

²⁰ Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, 63-64.

²¹ Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You*, 64-65.

It can educate in often faster (and sometimes more subtle) ways than older methods. And it is vastly entertaining. That factor should not be undervalued either.

The Internet, the most exciting new popular medium since the rise of television, has also been subjected to much animus since the rapid popularization of the personal computer in the 1990's and the subsequent boom in Internet culture. Nobel laureate Doris Lessing insisted during her 2007 acceptance speech that the Internet was making society dumber. Duncan Riley of *techcrunch.com* writes that, "According to Lessing...the inanities of the Internet have seduced a generation, and we live in a fragmenting culture where people read nothing and know nothing of the world."²² One suspects that there is more than a little bit of good old-fashioned "my-generation-is-better-than-your-generation" prejudice in Lessing's statement. Never mind the fact that the Internet has sparked a new information revolution, arguably on a scale that dwarfs even Gutenberg's print revolution.

Indeed, the British magazine *The Economist* rebuts the sort of criticism that Lessing and many other critics have offered towards the Internet in general and blogs in particular.

They begin by noting some of the criticisms:

"'Let Truth and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?' asked John Milton in *Areopagitica*, his rousing defence of a free press, in 1644. But in an era when a blog can be set up with a few clicks, not everyone agrees that more voices and more choices improve the quality of debate. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard law professor, has argued that by allowing people to retreat into 'information cocoons' or 'echo chambers' in which they hear only views they agree with, the blogosphere fosters polarisation—a fear widely shared by politicians. *Forbes* once called blogs 'the prized platform of an online lynch mob spouting liberty but spewing lies, libel and invective.'"²³

²² "Nobel Laureate Says the Internet Makes Us Dumb, We Say: Meh," last modified December 9, 2007, <http://techcrunch.com/2007/12/09/nobel-laureate-says-the-internet-makes-us-dumb-we-say-meh/>.

²³ "A Less Dismal Debate", *The Economist*, Dec 31, 2011, accessed July 9, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21542193>.

Sunstein's hand-wringing about echo chambers merits some weight...until one remembers that the existence of media echo chambers is nothing new. Indeed, in the age of newspapers' dominance, conservative New Yorkers would rally around the Wall Street Journal and the New York Post for their news, while liberal New Yorkers would trumpet the New York Times and the Village Voice. If anything, the Internet has begun to make exposure to alternate views somewhat unavoidable (witness the phenomenon of the Facebook homepage and newsfeed, where anyone on one's friend list may post an article that one would never have seen otherwise, forcing the reader to consider a new opinion; the only way to completely avoid this is if one's friends *already* consist entirely of ideological fellow travelers or if one consciously blocks their dissenting friends from their newsfeed).

In any case, Milton's quote sounds delightfully similar to Thomas Jefferson's quote over a century and half later in his first inaugural address, wherein—after the peaceful transfer of power from the Federalists to the Democratic-Republicans—he noted his intention to accept those whose views he disagreed with (an important note for Jefferson to make, considering that his inauguration came only a few years after the disturbing Alien and Sedition Acts had been sponsored by the Federalists). Jefferson, referring to the opponents of his movement, famously declared that it would be best to “let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” *The Economist's* staff appears to be writing in a similar vein when they assert that although some bloggers come across as extreme or uninformed, a society that believes in freedom must have the confidence to let all opinions be aired, so that reasonable opinions will also be free to eventually rise to the top through the necessary process of debate. There are many, such as Doris Lessing or Aaron Sorkin, who seem to disagree with this view, wistfully hearkening back to the pre-Internet days of print journals and the supposedly-infallible anchormen of the big three networks.

But according to *The Economist*:

“Previous publishing revolutions, such as the advent of printing, prompted similar concerns about trivialisation and extremism. But whatever you think about the impact of blogging on political, scientific or religious debate, it is hard to argue that the internet has cheapened the global conversation about economics. On the contrary, it has improved it.”²⁴

Indeed, the Internet has provided the public with some delightful teaching tools in regards to economics, and has served as an important medium for debate that has brought valuable discussions to millions people. *The Economist* notes:

“This debate is not always polite. But was it ever? The arguments between John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek in the 1930s, some of them published in academic journals, were not notable for their tact. One observer likened their exchanges to the brawling of ‘Kilkenny cats’. Both men, one suspects, would have relished taking their battle online.”²⁵

And indeed, they *have*...sort of. On Youtube, one can find the purposely-corny but memorable “Fear the Boom and Bust: Hayek vs. Keynes” video, featuring an economically-themed rap battle between actors representing Hayek and Keynes. Who would have expected a funny and memorable rap battle about the specifics of the Austrian School vs. the Keynesian School? Well, perhaps someone attuned—as the creators of the video obviously were—to the great potential of the Internet and other pop cultural phenomena such as rap. “A less dismal debate” indeed.

Beyond this, there are countless other educational resources available to millions thanks to the Internet. The Youtube-based Khan Academy features short educational videos about topics ranging from economics to biology. Khan Academy, which seems like a natural outgrowth of Silicon Valley’s intellectual and technological culture, has provided free

²⁴ “A Less Dismal Debate”, *The Economist*.

²⁵ “A Less Dismal Debate”, *The Economist*.

lessons to students (and adults) both within the United States and all around the world. *TIME* Magazine describes its founder and instructor, Salman Khan, thus:

“a 35-year-old hedge-fund manager turned YouTube professor to millions around the world. Thanks to his Khan Academy, an online repository of some 3,250 digital lectures, he has become a celebrity to techies, educators and uncounted high schoolers cramming for the AP biology test. His 18-minute discourse on the Krebs cycle and cell metabolism has been viewed more than 675,000 times.”²⁶

In the beginning, Khan started it as a hobby. He admits that he was initially one of the skeptics of the YouTube’s value. But he began putting lessons on YouTube as sort of a hobby...and the response was enormous. Webley relates:

“Eventually he decided his hobby was more than just a side project. In the fall of 2009, he quit his job and devoted his full attention to Khan Academy from a makeshift office in a converted closet in his home. The real breakthrough came in May 2010, when Ann Doerr, wife of Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr, dropped \$10,000 into his PayPal account...When Doerr found out it was his largest donation, she insisted that they meet. Khan spent an hour with Doerr over coffee, explaining his vision of how the way we think about learning could be fundamentally altered. On his drive home, his phone beeped with an incoming text message: Doerr said she planned to deposit an additional \$100,000 into his account. ‘I almost crashed the car,’ Khan says.”²⁷

Significantly, *TIME* notes that Khan’s innovative lessons have the potential to benefit disadvantaged students everywhere. Webley writes:

“Khan’s vision faces its biggest test yet in a pilot project at Eastside Prep, a charter school where all the students are economically disadvantaged and, if they make it, will be the first in their families to go to college. In the classroom of teacher Suney Park, when it’s time for math, the kids get out their netbooks to work on what Park calls the ‘Khaniculum.’”²⁸

And although Khan’s lessons emanate from California and are deeply embedded with the Silicon Valley philosophy, the benefits are not limited to American classrooms either.

Webley takes the reader on a trip to Africa to see his lessons in action:

²⁶ Kayla Webley, “Reboot the School”, *TIME Magazine*, Jul 9, 2012, accessed July 12, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2118298,00.html>.

²⁷ Webley, “Reboot the School.”

²⁸ Webley, “Reboot the School.”

“in Accra, Ghana, students at the African School for Excellence are studying logarithms. Their teacher is the same one firing off math tips in California--both groups of kids are learning by watching online videos...There's...a voice, deep, patient and unrehearsed--think NPR host crossed with Mister Rogers. His inflection rises at times to underscore a point or when he gets really excited. ‘Math is not just random things to memorize and regurgitate on a test next week,’ he says. ‘It's the purest way of describing the universe!’”²⁹

Khan's videos breathe life into what can be dry subjects for various students, reanimating the subject matter into exciting forces that pervade our world...and capture students' interest. And of course, there are also many, many more educational resources to be found on YouTube as well. Those who grew up in the 1990's can retrieve the *Bill Nye the Science Guy* lessons and music videos on YouTube as well, and show them to a younger generation to foster greater knowledge of science. There are innumerable “how to” style videos made by average users to show others how to accomplish various tasks, anything from exercise routines to carpentry to balancing a checkbook.

But critics such as Lessing often seem unaware of these Internet-based resources.

Riley writes:

“Keensian (as in Andrew Keen) anti-internet speeches grow as the cultural elite in society continue to have their previous (often born-in-to) positions eroded. The likes of Andrew Keen and Doris Lessing ignore the many benefits the Internet has provided in expanding access to knowledge to many, many more people than who may otherwise have had no access before. Whilst it may be easy to mock the utterances of hundreds of millions of bloggers and social networking site users, the 21st century will be remembered as the time that communication was democratized, a time where the power of a few was replaced by the power of many.”³⁰

Even research scholars and scientists are now beginning to harness the power of the Internet—and the masses—to help them with their research. “Crowdsourcing” is a phenomenon of the Internet age that is sweeping institutions and scholars into a realizing the vast untapped potential of an often-underestimated public. The expansive use of the wiki as a

²⁹ Webley, “Reboot the School.”

³⁰ “Nobel Laureate Says the Internet Makes Us Dumb, We Say: Meh,” .

new form of data-gathering has been revolutionary, and resulted in the creation of comprehensive online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia, which have additional data being added around the clock, every day and night of the year. Thus, the Internet has unleashed the power of the public to tackle projects that would be extremely time-consuming for a smaller number of people.

Acclaimed television and movie writer Aaron Sorkin—creator of masterful works such as the aforementioned-and-praised *The West Wing* and known for being hands down one of the best writers of dialogue in the entire television and movie industry—has unfortunately made Internet-bashing a particular focus of his since the 2000’s began. On *The West Wing* itself, a particular episode that raised some eyebrows was Season 3’s “The U.S. Poet Laureate”, in which White House staffer Josh Lyman is perturbed to discover the existence of leonlyman.com, a fansite dedicated to him. Josh decides to start posting responses on the site. His assistant, foil, and on-and-off love interest Donna warns him not to, saying that “Nobody knows” what’s wrong with the site’s members.³¹ He and Donna soon end up arguing with the site’s members and Josh later makes an arrogant speech about how the “chain-smoking, mumu-wearing”³² members of the site are essentially worthless and that the forum’s moderators are petty tyrants. White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg also admonishes Josh and Donna to never post on the Internet in the first place. In an otherwise fantastic episode, this subplot stuck out like a sore thumb. It turns out that the whole subplot was spurred by an interaction between Sorkin and fans on the popular website televisionwithoutpity.com. Sorkin had begun posting on the site under an alias, and soon

³¹ *The West Wing*. Episode no. 60, first broadcast March 27, 2002, by NBC. Directed by Christopher Misiano and written by Aaron Sorkin.

³² *The West Wing*. Episode no. 60, first broadcast March 27, 2002, by NBC. Directed by Christopher Misiano and written by Aaron Sorkin.

ended up arguing with the site's members over how much writing credit he deserved for a fan-favorite episode that turned out to be semi-autobiographical...about the family life of *another* writer who Sorkin had tried to take most of the credit from. Sorkin became involved in a back-and-forth with the fans on the Television Without Pity forums and eventually he wrote a rant where he essentially told them their opinions were worthless, and left in an indignant huff. Since then, the Internet-bashing in his work has only become more pronounced.

Sorkin's *The Social Network* could possibly be considered the new rallying cry of cultural figures (particularly in the Baby Boomer generation) who simply do not understand that newfangled Facebook those crazy kids are so fond of nowadays. *Ah, now we understand why these kids are so nuts about this Facebook thing. It's because they're socially-stunted freaks!* Sorkin's highly-fictionalized account of Mark Zuckerberg's founding of Facebook serves to distort the historical record in favor of putting a spin on not only the phenomenon of social media, but also on the psyche of the Millennial generation, that allows for more cultural and generational snobbery. Indeed, Michael Raine of the *Huffington Post* writes that in Sorkin's recent HBO drama *The Newsroom*, Will McAvoy—Sorkin's main character and mouthpiece—smugly tells a young Millennial-aged woman at an assembly that she is part of, “‘without a doubt, the Worst. Generation. Ever.’”³³ Sorkin's puffed-up smugness may be thoroughly satisfying to Internet-bashers, technophobes, and those who whose generational bias makes it hard for them to view other generations—both preceding and succeeding—with anything other than contempt, but to others it smacks of myopia.

³³ “Who is the Real ‘Worst Generation Ever,’ Mr. Sorkin?,” last modified June 20, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/michael-raine/generation-y_b_1632972.html.

And Sorkin's HBO drama *The Newsroom* also makes liberal use of Internet-bashing, as Sorkin attempts to hearken back to the days where media was more didactic. He attempts to channel Edward R. Murrow as he hearkens back a supposedly-ideal news anchor culture, from before what he regards as the crass democratization of the media, a development which Sorkin apparently despises, ignoring the possibility that the anchors of old may not have always done the best job possible, and that a more open discourse allows for more information.

Sorkin's very Federalist desire for public discourse to be controlled by those he deems worthy is troubling, and betrays both a lack of faith in the public and a snobbish self-aggrandizement, perhaps the same phenomenon observed by David Brooks. While the majority of the American public revels in Jeffersonian freedom and anti-elitism, it's tempting and easy to imagine the Aaron Sorkins, Noah Websters, Charles Eliots, Frederic Werthams and Pauline Kaels of the world sulking in the corner, grumbling that everyone else at the party is stupid anyway and not nearly as amazing as their own little clique.

It is certainly sad to see a skillful writer like Aaron Sorkin sully his works with silly tirades, tantrums, and rants colored by his hatred of the democratic Internet—the most transformative pop culture phenomenon of the 21st century thus far—and his disdain for the generation that uses it the most. The mind that devised a masterful show like *The West Wing* is certainly capable of greater things. There are very few writers out there who can match Sorkin's wit or his way with words, and when he's at his best (see: *The West Wing* episodes "Two Cathedrals" or "Twenty Five") his writing is both awe-inspiring and endlessly entertaining.

And ultimately, episodes like that epitomize the power of pop culture, as do well-written comic books, movies, and music. They take us into our imaginations and our minds and help us visualize things that have been, could be, or are just plain fun to think about. And perhaps most importantly, they express individuals' innermost emotions and thoughts and serve as an exercise in speaking one's mind. And pop culture, being financed not by aristocratic patrons but by the dollars of the general public, is democratic in nature, responsive to the emotions, desires, and dreams of all people, not just a select few.

Conclusion

American pop culture is here to stay, and it is the very essence of American culture. It *is* American culture. And that is not a bad thing. Indeed, it is a natural outgrowth of the American Revolution and the circumstances surrounding it. The anti-authoritarian sentiment in the American colonies, hyper-strengthened by the Revolution and codified in the Constitution ended up unleashing cultural forces that had far-reaching consequences, providing momentum towards greater freedoms to this day. The forces unleashed, described by Gordon Wood, created the environment witnessed by Alexis de Tocqueville in the America of the early 1800's.

The growing American anti-authoritarianism overturned Victorian social mores at incubators of freedom such as Coney Island, and then overturned them nationwide as a generational process towards greater freedoms continued. Attempts to quash popular cultural pastimes like football were held off, and attempts to censor comic books and movies—though successful for a time—were doomed to eventual failure in this environment. The invention of television and the Internet further democratized the culture and resulted in a more individualistic wave of culture that is still shaping the world today.

In much of the world, even within fellow Western nations such as France, the idea of free expression being an intrinsic right that is inherent in individuals (and not a right to be “granted” by a government) is still a very alien idea, unfortunately. In the People's Republic of China, of course, such a thought is likely to be not just alien, but an invitation to be arrested. *The Economist* notes that the Communist Party stomped its jackbooted foot down in the face of a televised singing competition that offered the Chinese people the opportunity

to freely vote for their favorite singers. The very concept smacked too much of freedom, apparently.

And yet, American pop culture is like a beacon, serving as an example of what can be, as an example of what freedom looks like. The oft-quoted idea of America being a City on a Hill—though originally meant by the settlers in Massachusetts as a theological concept—has evolved to have a social meaning: America symbolized an ideal of freedom—ever moreso as time went by—and even when people in far-flung lands were chided not to enjoy American culture, often with admonitions that it is somehow immoral or corrupting—there has always been an irresistibility about it, and even when cultural authorities demand that viewers in their countries shut off American TV programs, people still love to watch and get a piece of American culture, even if they have to in secret (such as in Cold War-era Eastern Europe via Radio Free Europe, or in the modern Middle East where people often listen to music or watch movies despite death threats from the Taliban or other extremist groups). And many people across the world dream of coming to America and taking part in the American Dream of freedom.

America's status as a new homeland for refugees, the nature of the first waves of pre-Revolutionary immigrants from the British Isles and the rest of Western Europe, the nature of the American Revolution, and the even larger waves of immigrants attracted by the ideals articulated the Revolution have informed America's political and social culture, and helped reinforce America's traditional and instinctive irreverence for elitism and authority. The people who came to America were usually fleeing from oppressive, elitist, and authoritarian systems of civilization back in their former homelands, and upon their arrival in America helped reinforce Americans' belief in the rightness of freedom and the wrongness of

authoritarian cultural systems. Thus, the vitality and experiences of ambitious immigrants helped to reinforce the ideals set in place by the American Revolution. It has been expressed by Emma Lazarus's famous poetic tribute to the Statue of Liberty, "The New Colossus," in which Lady Liberty famously beseeches the lands of the Old World to send their freedom-seeking peoples, no matter how destitute, to become part of America. This theme of immigrants and their vitality enhancing American culture has also been more recently expressed in Bruce Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams."

Indeed, Professor Daniel Cloud of Princeton writes in his book *The Lily* that immigrants who risked life and limb to come to a land of freedom generally tended to reinforce that freedom.

"Once you own a ship, you, like a honeybee, are wherever you are voluntarily. If you choose to, you can sail away. You're in a position to negotiate with the king. He may put you in a ghetto, but the joke is on him, because you can fly; he's the one that's rooted in one place like a shrub. In fact, if you can find such a crazy place, you can base yourself where there is no king, where everything is up for negotiation, someplace across the sea like Attica or America."¹

Thus, immigrants to America tended to reinforce America's already-existing anti-authoritarian ethos, making that ethos stronger and even more decisive. American restlessness and explorative energy, the American desire to get away from authority, to be adventurous and ambitious was thus fed by immigrants attracted by an America that the American Revolution had built into the most freedom-loving society on Earth. Indeed, the automobile is considered a classic symbol of American individualism and restlessness in pursuit of freedom, and Chinese-American immigrant and noted architect I. M. Pei has remarked that upon his arrival in America, the very first thing he wanted to do was buy a car, not just for practical reasons but also because of what it symbolized.

¹ Daniel Cloud, *The Lily: Evolution, Play, and the Power of a Free Society* (New York: Laissez-Faire Books, 2011), 101.

American pop culture's ability to transcend barriers and speak to the desire for freedom within all peoples is demonstrated each day as people across the world, even when forbidden by elite cultural authorities, tune in to American music and television.

In an article from the Associated Press from November 2011, the AP correspondent interviews Iraqi youth and discovers some fascinating cultural effects of the now-prolonged interaction between Americans and Iraqis. One of the Iraqi youth interviewed in the article made a statement that would be likely to confound and infuriate America-hating European upper-classmen, self-hating American Europhiles as well as the mullahs in his own country all at the same time: he said "I love the American troops."²

One can almost hear the anguished cries of both the theocratic mullahs in the Middle East and uptight Ameriphobic bohemians in the West, both ripping their hair and gnashing their teeth in agony, as the boy, named Mohammed, expresses his love for rap.

"Sporting baggy soldiers' camouflage pants, high-top sneakers and a back-turned 'N.Y.' baseball cap, the chubby 22-year-old was showing off his break-dancing moves on a sunny afternoon in a Baghdad park. A \$ sign was shaved into his closely cropped hair. 'While others might stop being rappers after the Americans leave, I will go on (rapping) till I reach N.Y.,' said Mohammed, who teaches part-time at a primary school."³

Such has been the story in many places around the world. American pop culture, precisely *because* it is a *popular* culture—from the Latin "of the people"—built from the bottom up through the accumulated decisions of millions of consumers, represents greater personal expression, greater avenues of imagination that one is allowed to openly explore and discuss, less deference to the elites of any society (indeed, often flouting such authorities), and in short, greater freedom. The American Dream.

² "US military legacy rubs off on Iraqi youth," last modified November 26, 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/us-military-legacy-rubs-off-iraqi-youth-165333231.html>.

³ "US military legacy rubs off on Iraqi youth," last modified November 26, 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/us-military-legacy-rubs-off-iraqi-youth-165333231.html>.

Once upon a time, fun-loving youth in America overcame the ire of Victorian cultural elites at Coney Island through the simple acts of flirtatiously exposing skin and playfully having fun. Today, youth encouraged by American pop culture are doing the same thing in countries in the Middle East and beyond. Young people dancing in Afghanistan are proving a point to the naysayers. While some may question the importance of (what are essentially) the events of *Footloose* playing out in Afghan villages, it actually does prove a great point: the intimidation of the Taliban cannot stop people from taking control of their own bodies and expressing their innermost emotions through dance and music. And in all arenas of entertainment, that is what American culture has essentially done for people. Passionate energies freed through the clash of football or the grace of dance symbolize the lifting of cultural restrictions. The free speech voiced in groundbreaking, more-busting TV shows and movies solidify it for many. Freedom, the American Dream, becomes visible in American pop culture.

Thus the very element that makes American pop culture so irresistible to the masses is also *the very same reason* why many governments and powerful cultural authorities abroad seek to restrict its spread. It is a direct challenge to the established order that has held sway over most of mankind since ancient times. It is a challenge to the elites' authority. All the finger-wagging of theocratic mullahs can't stop young people from wanting to flirt and cavort openly or stop women from wanting to express themselves through their clothing (any more than it could have stopped the impish young men and women at Coney Island). All the indignant braying from impotent kings and despots can't stop people from yearning for greater self-expression and freedom. American pop culture taps into something deep within all of us, a primal yearning to be free and to show our inner selves to all the world no matter

whether they find it an impropriety or not. It thus proves John Locke and Thomas Jefferson to have been fundamentally correct in their speculation on the ultimate nature of man. We all want to be free.

Bibliography

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve, Esq. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003)
- Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993)
- U.S. Constitution*
- Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001)
- Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004)
- Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1990)
- John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978)
- John J. Miller, *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011)
- Geoffrey Blodgett, "Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform," *The Journal of American History* 62 (1976)
- David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000)
- Andrei Markovits, *Uncouth Nation: Why Europe Dislikes America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007)
- Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005)
- Katherine G. Aiken, "Superhero History: Using Comic Books to Teach U.S. History," *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History* Vol. 24 No. 2 (2010)
- Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*, (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010)

Jim Trombetta, R. L. Stine, *The Horror! The Horror! Comic Books the Government Didn't Want You to Read!*, (New York: Abrams ComicsArts, 2010)

Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004)

“Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books”, accessed May 5, 2012, http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html.

“Horror on the Newsstands,” *TIME Magazine*, September 27, 1954, accessed May 4, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,820350,00.html#ixzz1tvGaaix>.

Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How it Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2008), 74-75.

Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010)

“Clint Eastwood on Dirty Harry,” last modified June 23, 2008, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1589746/clint-eastwood-reveals-how-ended-up-dirty-harry.jhtml>.

“The Dark Knight Snubbed in Best Picture Race,” last modified January, 22, 2009, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2009/01/22/the-dark-knight/>.

“Superheroes movies like Avengers Assemble should not be Scorned,” last modified April, 19, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2012/apr/19/avengers-assemble-tom-hiddleston-superhero>.

James Poniewozik, “Farewell to FNL”, *TIME Magazine*, Feb 14, 2011, accessed July 6, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2046052,00.html>.

Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005)

“Nobel Laureate Says the Internet Makes Us Dumb, We Say: Meh,” last modified December 9, 2007, <http://techcrunch.com/2007/12/09/nobel-laureate-says-the-internet-makes-us-dumb-we-say-meh/>.

“A Less Dismal Debate”, *The Economist*, Dec 31, 2011, .

Kayla Webley, “Reboot the School”, *TIME Magazine*, Jul 9, 2012, .

The West Wing. Episode no. 60, first broadcast March 27, 2002, by NBC. Directed by Christopher Misiano and written by Aaron Sorkin.

“Who is the Real ‘Worst Generation Ever,’ Mr. Sorkin?,” last modified June 20, 2012,
http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/michael-raine/generation-y_b_1632972.html.

Daniel Cloud, *The Lily: Evolution, Play, and the Power of a Free Society* (New York: Laissez-Faire Books, 2011).

“US military legacy rubs off on Iraqi youth,” last modified November 26, 2011,
<http://news.yahoo.com/us-military-legacy-rubs-off-iraqi-youth-165333231.html>.

Curriculum Vitae

Date of Birth: May 6, 1989

Birthplace: Secaucus, New Jersey

Secondary Education: Dr. Ronald E. McNair Academic High School, Jersey City, NJ

College Education: Rutgers University—New Brunswick 2007-2010 B.A. History, Rutgers
University Graduate School of Education 2010-2011 M.A. Social Studies Education, Rutgers
University—Newark 2011-2013 M.A. American History

Positions held: Teaching Assistant 2011-2012