



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

*to strengthen teaching in public schools®*

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2012 Volume I: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Consumer Culture

---

## Introduction

by Jean-Christophe Agnew, Professor of American Studies and History

What is consumer culture? When the Fellows in this seminar convened for our first discussion of the subject, we almost immediately faced the looseness, the elusiveness, of the concept.

Consumer culture seemed to occupy so much of the space around us and so much of the space within us – from our stomachs to our imaginations – that to get outside it, to walk around it and take its measure, so to speak, seemed near-impossible at first. Consumer culture is the medium in which we all live, some said, the air we breathe, the sea in which we all swim, the language we all speak.

By the same token, we also recognized that consumer culture was the language that our students spoke, the air they breathed, the sea in which they swam, and for that very reason, a medium that could prove more than serviceable in the classroom. The sheer familiarity of the idioms, imagery, artifacts, and performances of consumer culture meant that virtually any example, when deployed by an engaged and resourceful teacher, could open up new perspectives and hone critical skills that students could in turn bring to bear on the taken-for-granted – the taken-for-branded – world they inhabit. As the units produced in this seminar demonstrate, the Fellows have risen to this challenge by taking that which was most compelling for them among the works of history, sociology, anthropology, and literature that we read together and then translating it into a variety of original and compelling curricular topics and strategies.

That same resourcefulness shaped our seminar as well, not just our discussions but the reading we shared. For into the mix of political and social history, sociology, ethnography, economic geography, and fiction that I had chosen as our common core, the Fellows introduced authors they believed spoke in different and provocative ways to the question of consumer culture before us. Among the most memorable of these additions was Peter Menzel's *Material World: A Global Family Portrait* (1994), a pictorial and statistical compilation of material life in 30 different countries, each country or lifeworld represented by color photographs of the familial possessions of one of its "average" households.

In a sense Menzel's book could be taken as an update of Edward Steichen's equally memorable photographic exhibition and catalogue, *The Family of Man* (1955): a celebration of human kinship steeped in black-and-white imagery of generations, of rites of passage, of cycles of birth, courtship, work, and death. What makes *Material World* a document of our own post-Cold War, "globalized" epoch is Menzel's thematic focus on household consumption and, in particular on familial belongings. Paging through his global family album, we mark the material and cultural differences between households, between countries, between continents – differences made all the more stark (and measurable) by Menzel's decision to photograph the different household possessions spread out on the grounds outside a family's dwelling.

As teachers, we can all appreciate what a brilliant classroom tactic Menzel's visual inventories of household possessions are, how effectively his tableaux vivants stage the kind of compare-and-contrast relationships between countries and continents that we would otherwise only see represented in statistical charts or pie-graphs. Seen at a distance, though, Menzel's pictures are as intriguing for their ambiguities as for their promise of photographic precision. Why, after all, is this or that family standing outside their home amongst their belongings? Is it a yard sale? A foreclosure? An American Express ad? Are we looking at pictures of possessions or of dispossessions? The surreal, almost violent incongruity of these photographs – households turned inside out – draws us into the questions of consumer culture, global equity and survival that Menzel wants to think through. And more than that, the images linger in our mind's eye and in doing so keep these questions alive.

That is why, I suspect, Material World became an unexpected yet indispensable part of our seminar syllabus, our conversations, and a number of the curriculum units that grew out of those exchanges. Peter Menzel's "family portrait" avoids both the sentimentalism and the glib ironies of globalization-debates by compelling us to see consumer culture afresh, to see the exotic as familiar and the familiar as unexpectedly strange – as momentarily out-of-place, dislodged, decontextualized. Successful teachers look for different ways of doing just that every day, finding topics and tactics that will enable and incite their students to see and to analyze the material and cultural world they inhabit: the air they breathe, the sea they swim in, and the languages they speak.

The curriculum units that follow keep faith – each in its own way – with Menzel's strategy in The Material World, whether it is Andrea Kulas's critical exploration of music video genres (Menzel notes that his project, not to mention its title, was in part provoked by Madonna's marketing in 1992) or Jessica Shupik's thematic approach to race, hair-care, and coming-of-age stories; Mary Grace Flowers's primer for second-grade consumers or Laura Turner's historical and rhetorical analysis of the language and science in food-packaging; Amanda Davis-Holloway's 'Seussological' study of the political subtexts and contexts of Theodore Geisel's children's books or Natalia Baldwin's inquiry into the home-front politics of the zoot-suit during WWII; Molly Myer's consumer history and geography of a Chicago neighborhood or Elizabeth Lasure's ethnographic treatment of household possessions (our 'stuff') as the cultural components or ingredients out of which social identity, social relationships, and a socially-minded art are fashioned and refashioned, appropriated and reappropriated. The common theme of these units, then, is one with their common strategy: reorientation. These units have recalibrated my cultural and historical GPS, and I am sure they will do the same for others – students and teachers alike.

Jean-Christophe Agnew

---

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit [https://teachers.yale.edu/terms\\_of\\_use](https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use)