

Why Engaging with Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick Matters: A Review Essay

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Ray Browne on the Culture Studies Revolution: An Anthology of His Key Writings. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Ben Urish. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.

Pioneers in Popular Culture Studies. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Michael T. Marsden. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

Rejuvenating the Humanities. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992.

Icons of America. Eds. Ray B. Browne and Marshall Fishwick. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1978.

Legend is a term used pretty loosely in contemporary culture. For better or worse, the standard for deeming something or someone as an icon or iconic has dropped in reverse proportion to the number of mass communications channels available for such inflation. In this hyped-up technology age, almost anything that survives beyond Warhol's infamous 15-minute mark seems to fall into some exclusive category, even if placing it there cheapens the moniker. I, myself, have fallen victim to this simple labeling device, calling many people or things iconic across a broad swath of popular culture publications, from Patrick Swayze and Michael Jordan to Huggies diapers and *The Simpsons*. Was I right or wrong...well, as The Dude might say, "That's, like, just your opinion, man."

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1&2
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One thing we can rest assured as factual, though, is that Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick are icons in popular culture studies. Even here, though, before we simply accept this point, let us place the two pioneers in context for today's students, scholars, and readers. For the most part, Browne is most widely regarded for his work in founding the Popular Culture Association (PCA) and popular culture as a *legitimate* academic pursuit (even if many scholars still have to battle that point to tenure & promotion committee members and amongst more theory-based colleagues).

His friend and colleague Fishwick, though, has fared less well, certainly remembered for his part in founding the PCA and that he taught famed new journalist/novelist/white suit-wearing *icon* Tom Wolfe at Washington and Lee University. Alas, however, Fishwick has essentially slipped from the collective memory in comparison to Browne. For example, in all my years as a popular culture scholar attending national and regional meetings and in general conversations with members younger and older, I have never heard anyone mention Fishwick or reference one of his many books. This, despite a quick "Marshall Fishwick" Google Scholar search revealing 666 results on his name and another 8,990 Google Search hits.

In this collective retrospective of ideas and issues past, mainly featuring Browne and Fishwick as popular culture's Batman and his trusty sidekick Robin, the goal is that a fresh assessment demonstrates how central these thinkers' ideas still are today. In other words, I hope that we can collectively move away from the image of Ray Browne as popular culture's jolly Santa Claus and reestablish him as a radical scholar and theoretician who repeatedly put his reputation and livelihood on the line for the discipline. For Fishwick, the aim is as direct – can we rediscover this great scholar and provide him with a well-earned place on popular culture's Mount Rushmore?

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Some 21 years after its publication, *Rejuvenating the Humanities* remains a provocative and insightful essay collection. A relatively slim volume, the book features 20 essays by 17 scholars, addressing an array of topics, from animal rights and the humanities (Michael Pettengell) to television and the crisis in the humanities (Gary Burns).

What strikes this reviewer on re-reading the book is the radical tone that Fishwick and Browne adopt, yet couching their delivery in philosophical and theoretical language that makes the delivery erudite, rather than simple shouting from a large soapbox. More importantly, the ideas and opinions of the lead editors and their posse of scholars still hold up today as academe continues the “Battle for the Humanities” that graces the pages of the *New York Times* and *Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as hold center stage in state legislature’s from Texas and Arizona to Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. The battle rages on because we (arguably) live in the most anti-intellectual age the republic has yet experienced. Browne and Fishwick explain in the Prologue how important the humanities are, an idea that still holds up in the current battle:

The Humanities are perhaps the single most important and useful cultural philosophy driving societies and human actions. They oppose greed and lust and unbridled individual rapacity. They drive toward what is good in and necessary in society. To let the Humanities languish is to deprive life of the major beneficial living force in—or capable of being introduced into—society today. (3)

One can imagine this kind of language in an op-ed in a major newspaper or website, and the typical reader (particularly the anti-intellectuals) left wondering...rapacity?

Later, in an essay confronting the “crisis” in the Humanities, Fishwick delivers his typically delicious language, describing existentialism in a comprehensible way. He explains, “Existentialism has permeated our culture as dye permeates a jar of water. Even those who have never heard the word are haunted by the questions it raises. How can I exist genuinely” (12). Fishwick then ties existentialism to commitment and wonders aloud: “As we enter the final years of the twentieth century, what are we committed to?” (12). Unfortunately, in the decades that have passed, people seem no closer to answering that query, perhaps, unless we take an *Idiocracy* vision of life—nothing matters unless it is deep fried, sophomoric, violent, or sex-laden.

Browne’s radical perspective cuts deepest when it is turned on those academics that dismiss popular culture’s importance. Over and over again, Browne’s rapier slices at faculty members who rely on (he might say “hide behind”) theory and the latest fads, rather than content analysis, critical thinking,

or one's personal experience. In his essay, "Folk Cultures and the Humanities," for example, Browne says:

Academics like to sail their yachts down the gentle current of so-called intellectuality and come to anchor at some small island which represents the latest fad in theory-making. But the flotsam soon passes, the theory fades, and it is time to weigh anchor and drift to the next island ... Ponce de Leon could not find a fountain of youth. Intellectuals cannot find rich soil for their cultivation because their plows are too shallow. (33)

Browne had previously launched a similar attack in *Icons of America* (1978), another collection he co-edited with Fishwick. The book contains 23 essays by 24 authors that assess the notion of *icon* from numerous popular culture perspectives, ranging from comic book superheroes to Shirley Temple and George Washington.

In a scathing indictment of academe, Browne's essay is titled, "Academicons—Sick Sacred Cows." In this essay, Browne is at his angriest, comparing academics with religious orders that exist to elevate themselves and construct a social hierarchy that is beyond outside censure. He explains:

These academicons are in effect sacred cows that clutter and dirty the streets of academia and, because the flow of traffic is generally from the college campus outward to the world, therefore they spread out and all over non-academic communities. Although there are numerous incubi and succubi offshoots, the major academicons consist of a kind of secular holy trinity: the Ivory Tower, the curriculum and "standards." (293)

As sacred cows, Browne reports, academics repudiate what they know to be strengths of the humanities, such as critical thinking or developing intellectual curiosity, instead focusing on "self-interest" and "self-perpetuation" (295). In a comment that all educators (K-16+) should take to heart, Browne says:

Scratch the professor of Humanities and you often find an inhumane person. Such professors do not teach the mind to think independently and search out new truths and new richness to life. Instead they are more likely to teach students to remember facts and to be safe by searching only along fairly well known paths. (295)

Browne's comment flies in the face of so much of the K-12 obsession with standardized management, whether symbolized by the tragic failure of No Child Left Behind or the newly-polished Common Core Standards. As a result, colleges and universities are left holding the bag for a primary and secondary education system that has gutted creativity, critical thinking, and historical nuance. Browne pointed to the tendency of academics to polish the "Curriculum," rather than "real and full scale revamping of the whole program" (295). If only those who sanctified the "Curriculum" some 35 years ago could have foreseen that the twenty-first century democratization of higher education would seek to eliminate the humanities altogether, not just keep them cloistered away from the masses!

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It is difficult to count the number of books that Fishwick and Browne wrote and edited, even with access to several databases [the Library of Congress catalog would shed light on these figures, but is unavailable due to the government shutdown]. Yet, we can get a clear sense of both men's importance in the popular culture movement in the classic *Pioneers in Popular Culture Studies* (1999), edited by Browne and Michael T. Marsden. A collection of profiles, the book provides in-depth biographical and intellectual profiles of the leaders chosen for inclusion. With Browne's *Mission Underway: The History of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association and the Popular Culture Movement, 1967-2001* (2002), the two books provide a full treatment of the establishment of the movement directly from its leaders.

What is striking in both books, particularly in *Pioneers*, is the way scholars who wanted to study popular culture and formalize it as a discipline put their careers in jeopardy. For example, Browne's tenuous relationship with colleagues who did not share his belief in the democratization of education and topics of study cost him dearly. As the eminent Gary Hoppenstand outlines in *Pioneers*, Browne's chair at the University of Maryland told him he would be awarded tenure on a Friday and then revoked the decision the following Monday after a senior professor intervened. Thus, Browne had to leave the college, even though he had purchased a house nearby over the weekend. Although Hoppenstand notes that Browne left, "without a deep-felt bitterness," it is hard to imagine that the

wound did not ache for years (40). His straightforward, yet slightly flippant explanation of the events surrounding being denied tenure outlined in *Mission Underway* undercuts the rosy picture. While this episode may shock today's younger readers, it is even more appalling that Browne also faced intense criticism and resentment at Bowling Green, a mix of academic jealousy based on the publicity and growing fame he enjoyed and a deep conservatism by those in the old guard.

Fishwick's journey seems less tenuous and combative from his profile in *Pioneers*, yet he too moved around quite a bit in his career (four universities and a 2-year stint in a non-teaching position in an era where most scholars stayed where they received tenure), despite being acknowledged as a prolific scholar and captivating classroom teacher. According to fellow popular culture scholar Daniel Walden, Fishwick "and many of us have been ignored, or shunned, or punished for pursuing popular culture, a movement, although it is not clear if it's a discipline, or a branch of the humanities or social sciences" (*Pioneers* 106).

While I certainly do not mean to be indelicate, what strikes me in spending time with Fishwick's lucid and thought-provoking writing is that more prestigious or general trade publishers did not snap him up. For example, without stepping on toes, Fishwick and I shared a publisher – the former Haworth Press (purchased by the Taylor & Francis Group and then becoming part of Routledge). Given the importance of branding and book covers in contemporary publishing, Haworth killed *Popular Culture: Cavespace to Cyberspace* (1999), *Popular Culture in a New Age* (2001) and *Probing Popular Culture On and Off the Internet* (2004) with horrendous covers featuring cartoonish drawings that would not pass muster in my eight-year old daughter Kassie's classroom. Like all of Haworth's books, they were also priced beyond the budget of general readers, even in less expensive paperback editions.

Again, not wanting to stir up trouble for yesterday or today's popular culture scholars, might I suggest that Browne having to found his own publishing arm and Fishwick publishing what could be considered his life's works with Haworth rather than Knopf or Oxford University Press demonstrates what Walden emphasizes above, the fact that popular culture scholars have been "ignored" and "shunned" for pursuing it as a primary line of inquiry.

Certainly, not every scholar even wants to write "general" or "trade" books or publish in stylish, glossy magazines, but if the true greats like Browne and Fishwick did not, is there something afoot here? No one would deny that a trade

publisher might have provided the marketing and sales push that would have granted either of them a vastly larger audience. If nothing else, a large publisher may have ensured that even more potential readers would engage with their ideas. Now, admittedly, I do not have many of the details about the publishing agendas of Browne and Fishwick (in *Mission Underway*, scholars can learn about the founding and success of the Bowling Green Popular Press). Thus, my conclusions could be wildly off base, yet even if they are, I believe that there is some truth in the extent that popular culture scholars have been (and continue to be) marginalized in varying degrees.

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Ben Urish's *Ray Browne on the Culture Studies Revolution* is a fine start on what should be a slew of future books and articles about Browne and his consequences as a key American intellectual. Urish must be commended for working with Browne while he lived and then completing the project after his death, resulting in a foundational text for those scholars and readers interested in understanding the depth and breadth of Browne's academic work.

Ironically, as Urish tells, he quickly learned while a graduate student at Bowling Green State University the cruel fact about Browne's standing – students respected his work in founding the field of study and PCA, but did not actually read his voluminous writings (5). And this fact at Bowling Green! Urish correctly concludes, "Browne's work was unjustly overlooked" (6)

One could certainly argue that this state of non-readership continues, for example, in that Browne's work is not properly acknowledged or cited in most "popular culture" readers currently on the market, whether the second edition of Marcel Danesi's *Popular Culture: Introductory Perspectives* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012) or LeRoy Ashby's mammoth 712-page *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (University of Kentucky Press, 2006). In each of these cases, there is no reference to Browne's writing in either. Certainly, individuals who knew Browne and the many academics that studied under him have kept his memory alive via PCA and regional association meetings. (In my own case, I think Gary Hoppenstand and Kathy Merlock Jackson are sick of hearing me ask questions about Browne and what it was like

to work with him.) The sad fact, however, is that many popular culture scholars—and particularly young scholars—are not engaging with him intellectually.

As such, Urish's volume is critical in "reintroducing" Browne to a new generation of scholars who should not only acknowledge his role in creating multiple spaces for popular culture scholars to disseminate their work, but also read and re-read Browne as a foundational thinker (7). "Browne's far-reaching but malleable underlying ideas, and his deep readings of the social effects and affectations of democratic-capitalistic enterprises," Urish explains, "make him an especially insightful and invigorating (if unrecognized and unacknowledged) cultural studies voice" (6)

One of the most compelling essays included in Urish's collection is "The Theory-Methodology Complex: The Critics' Jabberwock." Originally publishing in *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1995, the piece may be one of Browne's most-read articles. However, it might also be one of his most misinterpreted, given that it stands as a kind of anti-theory screed in many people's minds. That misconstrued notion has had far-reaching consequences. One often hears repeated at national and regional PCA meetings that the guiding spirit of the organization is taking a stance against theory. Urish's introductory notes on the essay clear up this confusion and should get today's readers pointed in the proper direction. Browne, for his part, is clear that popular culture scholars should be open to a myriad of theories and methodologies, explaining, "Not basing our whole point of view and theory and methodology on one approach, we can more easily shift gears and see other points of approach and view" (97). Clearly, this is not *anti*-theory, but all-inclusive and not reliant on the latest fads. Instead, the researcher should employ the tools needed to complete a job, pulling from disciplines that make sense to the project.

My minor quibble with Urish's collection probably seems pretty evident at this point. Rather than offering up what is essentially Browne's "greatest hits," I would have liked to see Urish dig a bit deeper and uncover the radical Browne that grabbed readers by the throat with a sense of urgency that is sorely lacking in today's scholarship. The examples I have presented above point to this kind of aggressiveness and Browne's willingness to put himself "out there" in a bold way, despite the potential backlash, which more or less a guarantee in academic circles.

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One finds distractions easy in a world where an infinite amount of “content” is available at one’s fingertips. For example, a YouTube search for “Ultraman” (the 1960s live-action superhero series from Japan later introduced to American audiences) returned 202,000 clips, which means a fan could spend countless hours reliving reruns and other tangential videos. In this blur of information from the past and accumulating at an even more rapid rate each day, one might find it easy to reduce our icons to sound bites. In such a scenario, great scholars like Browne and Fishwick might be viewed as veritable statues or portraits hung on the wall to honor them for their accomplishments.

What I hope this review essay demonstrates, however, is that not engaging with these scholars on an intellectual basis does a disservice to them and their legacy we have inherited. Browne and Fishwick (along with the dozen or so other popular culture studies founders) are foundational intellectuals and might well guide us into the future as we battle on numerous fronts: the warfare over the state of the humanities, the status of contingent faculty members, the “jobs” rhetoric emanating from the national political parties, and some online degree programs as semi-sanctioned diploma mills.

Scholars today have no obligation to return to their roots. As a matter of fact, some academics rejoice in tearing down sacred walls, hoping to start anew. If I can be so bold as to make a request, though, please carve out the time to revisit Browne and Fishwick. Yes, they deserve a place in our hearts for founding the associations and publications that we covet. More importantly, however, these great scholars merit a space in our minds as we navigate and negotiate our lives as intellectuals.

Works Reviewed

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THE **POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL**

VOLUME 1

NUMBERS 1 & 2

2013

CONTENTS

Editorial: What is Popular Culture? 1

Bob Batchelor

ARTICLES

Daniel Amos and Me: The Power of Pop Culture and Autoethnography 6

Andrew F. Herrmann

**When the Abyss Looks Back: Treatments of Human Trafficking in
Superhero Comic Books 18**

Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton

**Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential
Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan 36**

Marcelo Vieta and Laureano Ralon

**9/11 Did Not Take Place: Apocalypse and Amnesia in Film and
The Road 61**

Jesse Kavadlo

**“I Did Them Things So You Wouldn’t Have To”: *Secret Window*
and the Characters Who Won’t Stay Dead 84**

Jan Whitt

***Boardwalk Empire*: The Romantic Side of Crime and Capitalism 100**

Ashley M. Donnelly

**Why Engaging with Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick Matters: A
Review Essay 116**

Bob Batchelor

INTERVIEW

Figure/Ground Communication Presents: Arthur Asa Berger **126**
Interviewed by Laureano Ralon

BOOK REVIEWS

New Perspectives on Classics Texts **138**
Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870
Nathan Saunders

Reviews of New Books **142**
Gaga Feminism: Gender, Sexuality, and the End of Normal
Tammie Jenkins

Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation
Veronica Popp

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS **148**

<http://mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/volume-1/>