

The American Eighties Literacy

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Starting from the fairly recent expansion of the concept of *literacy* to include “knowing the basics of; being knowledgeable about”, the paper illustrates the possibility and desirability of being knowledgeable about a single decade. Specifically, about the 1980s as a chronological section of the description of American Society as a complex sociocultural phenomenon. The paper illustrates techniques that make possible the compilation of lists of items descriptive and significant of the American 80s, from the briefest (7 items) to long lists-inventories not unlike Hirsch’s 5,000-item Cultural Literacy List (1987). As possible sources of listable 80s-specific (*literacy*) items the paper discusses at some length the reviews of the decade in weekly newsmagazines, information almanacs, encyclopedias and “dictionaries of new words”. The usefulness of such lists for students of American civilization is pointed out; also, some crosscultural implications involved in the compilation of such *literacy* inventories.

1.

A good title to a paper should make the issue dealt with as clear as possible. The stress is on ‘possible’ because some clarification is often required and this may be the case here. This paper, then, proposes to deal with the “*literacy of the American Eighties*”, to use a more leisurely syntactic pattern. Consequently, what is tackled here are the phenomena of *literacy* and the *American Eighties*. They are interdependent: *literacy* as the inclusive term and the *American Eighties* narrowing it down to a specific *literacy*. Now that the title makes structural sense, we assume that the two structural components, *literacy* and the *American Eighties*, also make lexical sense, separately and in combination.

Literacy, surprisingly, is a comparatively recent word. Its earliest record, according to the OED, is from 1883, in a quotation from the New England Journal of Education: “Massachusetts is the first state in the Union in *literacy* in its native population” (Whatever ‘native’ is supposed to mean). The meaning of *literacy* as used here is, to quote the OED again: “the quality or state of being literate; knowledge of letters; condition in respect of education, esp. ability to read and write”. [It is interesting that *literacy*, as the

OED informs us, was "formed as an antithesis to illiteracy", a much older word (first record from 1660).]

In recent decades, however, this original meaning began to be used in a transferred, expanded sense to include "knowing the basics of; being knowledgeable about". We thus first encounter the expression *economic literacy* as early as 1943 (*Amer. Mag.* 103/1, "To help many of the poverty-stricken peoples to set their feet on the path of education, manual dexterity, and economic literacy"). More recently, the expression *computer literacy* is recorded in the *Barnhart Dictionary Companion* in a quote from 1979, marked as "frequent". The current vogue of *computer literacy*, and the instinctive feeling that *literacy* has developed into a suffix word, makes it possible to coin, or just imagine, a whole string of such expressions: *video-game literacy*, *stock-market literacy*, *group-therapy literacy*, et cetera (a slangy version is also possible, with *savvy* or the recent *smarts* replacing *literacy*). All this, naturally, does not mean that word production closer to the original meaning of *literacy* has stopped: witness the low *geographic literacy* as a current concern of U.S. educationists.

The other half of this paper's title - the *American Eighties* - makes lexical sense within its chronological-cultural set. Dealing with American Society as a complex sociocultural phenomenon with a respectable (four-century) continuity, it is clearly desirable to break it down into chronological segments. A decade is a psychologically satisfactory quantity of time: human life is perceived as made up of decades; history also makes convenient use of decades.

This paper, then, sets out to deal with the American Eighties, more precisely the Nineteen Eighties, in itself an unremarkable proposition. The full proposition, however, assumes that there is such a thing as literacy about (or being literate about) the American Eighties. Using *literacy* in its recent, specialized meaning of, let me repeat, "knowing the basics of; being knowledgeable about", we have to ask ourselves two questions. First, how relevant, academically or otherwise, is "knowing the basics of the American Eighties" or "being knowledgeable about the American Eighties"? Second, if this is relevant, how do we go about getting to know the "basics" of or becoming "knowledgeable" about the American Eighties?

A number of arguments could be advanced, establishing the relevance of the American Eighties. For instance, once the academic relevance of American Studies (Crossdisciplinary) has been established beyond doubt, the compartmentalization of such a large body of knowledge into more manageable chunks and chunklets is a logical next procedure. A decade, as already pointed out, is a psychologically satisfactory length of time. It is also, and this is naturally more relevant, an analytically effective segment of organized knowledge which makes possible the condensation and reinterpretation of cross-disciplinary matter and data, basically horizontal in their distribution, around a chronological pivot, a vertical time axis. Finally, the irrefutable pragmatic argument: how can the American Eighties *not* be relevant when serious, scholarly conferences have been set up around the subject (like the recent, October 1990 interuniversity seminar "The 1980s: America in Transition" in Dubrovnik).

Now for the second question: how do we go about getting to know the "basics" of or becoming "knowledgeable" about the American Eighties? The basics ("fundamentals", "ABCs", "rudiments") of a subject are, obviously, quite different from being

"knowledgeable" about the subject. The former implies "minimum constituents without which a thing or system would not be what it is" (MW9); the latter is defined as simply "possessing or indicating much knowledge" (Collins). Consequently, we are faced with a wide span between "minimum constituents" and "much knowledge", with "much knowledge" naturally shading off into specialist discourse. Any subject, any discrete item, from the huge and bewilderingly complex field of American Studies can be tackled at and from each end of this span. Thus, Brooklyn (why not?) can be dealt with at the most elementary level in a, say, 50-word family lexicon entry with Brooklyn as headword. Or, at the other, specialist-discourse end of the scale, we may encounter something something called "Ethnography of P.S. 110 in Brooklyn" (an actual article).

2.

Now let us see how the American (Nineteen) Eighties, as an autonomous body of knowledge, may be fitted into this Procrustean bed of a scale, stretching all the way between "fundamental" and "specialist".

The most condensed description of U.S. society in the Eighties must be the following single sentence from one of the Letters to the Editor of Time Magazine, in the issue of May 28, 1990:

For those who grew up in a decade of nuclear threat, AIDS, scandal-ridden evangelists, nation-wide crack use and yuppies, *nothing* is shocking anymore.

What we have here is in fact a cohesive, meaningful list of sociocultural fundamentals, admirable in its compactness and effectiveness as description. The fact that it is a list of personal perceptions does not reduce its value as condensed information. Personal perceptions, after all, are largely shaped by collective perceptions, themselves arising from collective experience. Of course, there is no need to defend perceptions as part of the concept of culture used in sociocultural studies (with culture including "ideas, beliefs and values" functional in a society or social group).

Newsmagazines like Time and Newsweek, also the weekly editions/magazines of the leading U.S. dailies, like the New York Times and the Washington Post, are good hunting grounds for broad surveys of current American events, trends and general growth. The closing weeks of the last year in a calendar decade, and the opening weeks in the first year of the new decade are the best time to look for such surveys.

So, in the National Weekly Edition of the Washington Post for the week of December 18-24, 1989, we find a 12-page survey entitled "Say Goodbye to the 80s". It is a collection of five articles, in fact reports from five American cities (Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City, Colorado Springs and New York). Three of them used local issues and projects to illustrate, through personal stories, a variety of problems and trends significant for the eighties. Two stories dealt with specific corporations, whose difficulties, efforts to adapt or runaway success were equally representative of the decade: the report from Chicago concentrating on Inland Steel while the New York story was mostly about MTV.

The purpose and tone of "Say Goodbye to the 80s" is indicated in the following lines from the first report:

“The Washington Post explores some aspects of the country’s experience in these 10 years. They were crowded ones, filled with events from the AIDS epidemic to the Iran-contra affair to the waning of the Cold War that are not addressed in these articles. Instead they focus on the conditions of life for ordinary Americans and on the country’s economic life and popular culture”.

Three specific items – AIDS epidemic, Iran-contra affair and the waning of the Cold War – are directly extractable from the paragraph.

No specific items are as conveniently listed later on in the article, in the observation of a Detroit judge on the changing nature of crime in Detroit, though the phenomenon is certainly relevant for the texture of life in the American Inner City in the eighties:

“The typical case I prosecuted in the ’70s was a street mugging or armed robbery. Today, the typical case going to trial is a homicide, a first-degree murder caused by someone messing up a \$50 to \$150 drug transaction”.

A skilled item hunter, however, would probably have no difficulty in formulating at least one specific item from the above paragraph: drug-related crime. Still, the effort of reading analytically the 12 pages with some 2,300 words of the total text in the Washington Post Weekly survey – to come up with maybe a few dozen specific items descriptive of the eighties in the U.S. – has to be seen as a deterrent.

4.

We do not have to look any further for a source of explicitly listed specific items descriptive of the 1980s in America than Time Magazine again. This weekly has a standing tradition of presenting the decade just passed in a picture-and-text survey called “Best/Most of the Decade”. The survey for the eighties was offered in the issue of Jan. 1, 1990. Its nine pages contain six sections: Ethics, People, Cinema, Books, Technology and Design. A complete listing of persons, events, books, films and things included illustrates best the criteria of selection and the range covered:

Ethics (12 leading scandal/ist/s of the decade)

Oliver North, Vanessa Williams, HUD financial affair, Gary Hart (and Donna Rice), televangelist sexual scandals (Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart), Pentagon procurement scandal, Abscam sting, Ivan Boesky, Pete Rose
[non-U.S. items left out: Ben Johnson, Hitler’s fake diary]

People

Bruce Springsteen, Cher, Madonna, Nancy Reagan, Eddie Murphy, Michael Jackson, Sylvester Stallone, Meryl Streep
[left out: Mother Teresa, Princess of Wales]

Cinema

Raging Bull, E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial, The Purple Rose of Cairo, Prizzi’s Honor, Out of Africa, Brazil, The Fly, Blue Velvet, The Last Emperor
[left out: Wings of Desire]

Books (Fiction)

Rabbit is Rich (J. Updike), Him with His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories (S. Bellow), The Accidental Tourist (A. Tyler), Zuckerman Bound (Ph. Roth), The Bonfire of the Vanities (T. Wolfe), Billy Bathgate (E.L. Doctorow)
[left out: The Collected Stories (I.B. Singer), Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter (M.V. Llosa), The

Unbearable Lightness of Being (M. Kundera), Love in the Time of Cholera (G.G.Márquez); and the entire subsection of Nonfiction)

Technology

fax machine, cellular telephone, Walkman, home video games, compact discs, video-cassette recorder, voice mail, video dating services, wireless remote control, personal computer
[No better proof needed that the 80s were the Electronic Decade]

Design

Viet Nam Veterans Memorial (Washington); Seaside, Florida; MTV Graphics; Equa chair; Battery Park City; Apple Macintosh Computer; 1984 Olympics; Humana Corporation Headquarters; Loyola Law School; Mazda Mx-5 Miata

What we are dealing with here are simply ready-made lists of items representative, symbolic, of America in the eighties, or, in varying degrees and senses, relevant for it. The sixty-odd items obtainable from this survey, together with maybe 30-40 items extractable from the Washington Post National Weekly, and the 7 items listed in the letter to the (Time) Editor quoted – bring our inventory of the American-Eighties-specific items up to around 100, or a little fewer because of repetition.

5.

Let us now analyze some other possible sources for more such items. In the absence of the ideal source – a reference volume specifically covering American Society in the 80s (say, a “Lexicon of the American Eighties”) – we have to turn to reference works that may, less directly, help us toward that rather esoteric goal of defining the American Eighties Literacy. What I have in mind here are, first of all, such family standbys as annual information almanacs. Any of them will do, I suppose, so I used the one that I happened to have at home: *The 1990 World Almanac (and Book of Facts)*. In its 122nd year of continuous publication, it is, without doubt, a minor institution.

It so happens, that the 1990 issue contained (on pp. 35, 36) a direct survey of the decade, entitled “The Decade in Review: Heroes, Victims, and Villains of the 1980s”. The survey first briefly reminds us that in its issue for 1980 the Almanac also identified the “heros, victims, and villains” of the 1970s who “embodied the trends and issues of the decade”. The persons profiled were: Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger; Deng Xiaoping; Leonid Brezhnev; Andrei Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; Anwar Sadat; the Shah of Iran; Idi Amin Dada; Patty Hearst; Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein; Gloria Steinem and Phyllis Shlafly; and Betty Ford. The almanac then asks “Which personalities might best symbolize the 1980s?” and offers the following list, with brief explanatory comment: Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa, Aya-tollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Gen. Manuel Noriega, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Lt. Col. Oliver North, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Donald Trump. Each personality is profiled in a concise explanatory comment, and so are a few collective personalities, as it were, also offered on the list: black Americans, AIDS victims, the homeless and the women’s movement. Finally, the list also includes terrorism, drug trafficking and “social problems” of the eighties as separate items, each with a short description.

Naturally, each of these individual or collective profiles, comments and descriptions contains a number of eighties-specific items – ranging all the way from additional

personalities, events, phenomena, movements and trends down to catch phrases. To mention only a few: Reaganomics, gasoline crunch and savings-and-loan institution crisis (item: “Reagan”); crack and “just say no” (item: “drug trafficking”); Rainbow Coalition (item: “Jesse Jackson”); Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jackson and Eddie Murphy (item: “black Americans”). Most such additional items were supplied, needless to say, by the collective item “social problems of the 80s”: child abuse; insider trading, leveraged buyout, junk bonds; steroid use; greenhouse effect, acid rain, toxic waste, unsafe nuclear power plants; surrogate mother, “Baby M”; right to die.

6.

Popularity lists must by no means be disregarded as sources of eighties-specific items. This same Almanac offers a very useful list of the Heroes of Young America: 1980–1989, compiled from the Almanac’s annual polls of high school students:

1980 Burt Reynolds
1981 Burt Reynolds
1982 Alan Alda
1983 Sylvester Stallone
1984 Michael Jackson
1985 Eddie Murphy
1986 Bill Cosby
1987 Tom Cruise
1988 Eddie Murphy
1989 Michael Jordan

Being literate about a decade – it does seem obvious – surely entails having at easy recall the most popular personalities of the decade.

7.

The next genre of reference works to look up in our search for eighties-specific items are the annual supplements issued by all large encyclopedias. Though covering the entire area of encyclopedic knowledge, they offer, within it, sociocultural information about American society, with the same thoroughness and, at times, dryness. A close examination of three most recent annual supplements – *Britannica Book of the Year (1989)*, *The World Book Year Book (1989)* of the World Book Encyclopedia, and *The Americana Annual (1990)* of Encyclopedia Americana – showed the last to be the most promising in terms of the “pay dirt” I was after: eighties-specific items, narrowed down to American society.

Although a few sections of *The Americana Annual* for 1990 (The Year in Review, Chronology, Feature Articles of the Year) contain some fairly direct eighties-specific material, they all pale in comparison with the section entitled The 1980s – A Look Back. Self-described as a “summary of some of the highlights and trends of the decade”, it offers ten highly condensed annual surveys on a mere nine pages (nearly half of which

space is taken up by photographs). Each of these surveys is made up of a short chronological list of events and an even briefer listing of trends, curiosities and undated political events significant for the decade (under the heading *The Year Also Saw*).

To illustrate, here is the full summary for 1985, in the original format:

- January 20:** President Reagan and Vice-President Bush were sworn in for a second term.
- February 5:** Spain fully reopened its border with Gibraltar, which had been closed since June 1969.
- March 11:** Mikhail Gorbachev was named chairman of the Soviet Communist Party following the March 10 death of Konstantin Chernenko.
- April 26:** Leaders of the Warsaw Pact nations ratified a 20-year extension of the Soviet-led military alliance.
- May 1:** President Reagan ordered a trade embargo against Nicaragua, saying that Nicaraguan actions were a threat to U.T. security.
- June 10:** Israel completed the final phase of its military withdrawal from Lebanon.
- September 1:** A team of U.T. and French researchers located the *Titanic*, the ocean liner lost in 1912.
- September 19:** A major earthquake rocked southwestern Mexico, devastating portions of Mexico City.
- November 21:** President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev concluded a summit meeting in Geneva; no major breakthroughs occurred.
- December 8:** The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) abandoned its price structure to concentrate on capturing a "fair" share of the market.
- December 28:** Warring militias in Lebanon signed an agreement, mediated by Tyria, to end ten years of civil war. Violence continued to plague the nation, however.

THE YEAR ALSO SAW Live Aid, a rock music telethon, which raised \$70 million for African famine victims, and the Farm Aid concert, which raised \$10 million to benefit the American farmer, heavily burdened by debt; increased international terrorism; violence and unrest in South Africa; protest over the introduction of a new formula for Coca-Cola and the reintroduction of the old formula; a new pro football celebrity Chicago's William 'the Refrigerator' Perry; Wrestlingmania; continued fighting in Central America where El Salvador's government has been battling leftist guerrillas and Nicaragua's Sandinista junta has been fighting guerrillas supported by the United States; and the New York City case of Bernhard Goetz, who claimed self-defense in a December 1984 subway shooting.

As we can see, of the eleven chronologically listed items only four (Jan. 20, May 1, Sept. 1, Nov. 21) may qualify as relevant for the American Eighties Literacy. The items listed under *The Year Also Saw* are, however, of an entirely different nature and they almost all qualify (those that do not: increased international terrorism; violence and unrest in South Africa; continued fighting in Central America). The total of 1985 items that qualify: nine. Other yearly surveys, however, such as the one for 1987, contain more such items (14). The total of items supplied by the section *The 1980s - A Look Back* may well be around 150. Together with some 100 items already listed or estimated as extractable from other sources (*Time Magazine* and *Washington Post Weekly National*)

this constitutes a list of some 250 items. Naturally, many more items – a few hundred easily – can be mined (more aptly: milked) from the bulk of the *Americana Annual* for 1990, preceding the section just analyzed.

8.

The list can, no doubt, be expanded significantly by addressing other possible sources of eighties-specific items. In history books, for instance, the closing chapters are likely to be on the United States in the 80s and to yield some such items. Thus “America in the Eighties”, the closing chapter in William Chafe’s book *The Unfinished Journey*, supplies the notable eighties-specific item “the evil empire” on its very first page. The second page contributes: Arthur Laffer, the Laffer Curve, supply-side economics and the description of the government as a “monkey on people’s back” (also Anne Burford and James Watt as, perhaps, less obligatory items).

9.

Language, specifically vocabulary, possesses a singular sensitivity to sociocultural change, reflecting this change with little delay and in a number of intriguing ways. A very possible paper, fitting smoothly into any conference on the American 80s, could have been something entitled “The 80s Words – Vocabulary of a Decade”, or “New Words in the 80s”, or “American English and Societal Change (1980–1989)”, et cetera. So, an approach to the 1980s in the U.S. via the concept of decade-specific literacy cannot ignore the linguistic, specifically lexical, aspect of it. We can, indeed should, build a list of the eighties-specific items by including vocabulary items as well. A systematic way of inclusion implies a close scrutiny of obvious sources such as lists and dictionaries of “new words”.

We might begin by looking at the new words lists provided by some of the annual supplement volumes to encyclopedias. So, the *World Book Year Book* for 1989 offers a three-page Dictionary Supplement with some 50 vocabulary items (recorded as appearing in 1989 for the first time). A significant portion are too technical to qualify for a list of general literacy (*b-quark, electroglow*), or just general slang with no direct socio-cultural relevance for the 80s (*bimbo, sleazeball*). Only a few items obviously qualify (*Nintendo, cold fusion, Batmania*).

What looks like a more promising method – going through actual “dictionaries of new words” – has problems of its own. So, the Merriam-Webster series of such dictionaries (the *6,000 Words*, the *9,000 Words* and the *12,000 Words*) lack chronological data for individual entries. Consequently, the only way of separating (roughly) the 80s entries from the rest is by laboriously comparing the inventories of all three volumes, each of which incorporates the entire contents of the previous volume or volumes, in order to weed out the entries appearing only in the third volume (*12,000 Words*) which came out in 1986.

Barnhart's *Dictionaries of New English* (1973, 1980, 1990), with each entry chronologically marked (for the earliest written record), are an obvious improvement. Even here, though, we have to wade through an entire volume and pick out the items chronologically belonging to the 80s. The most elegant technique, therefore, is consulting Barnhart's *Dictionary Companion*, a publication that has been appearing since 1979 at somewhat irregular intervals. All we have to do here is to select items that qualify as relevant for the American 80s Literacy List as defined so far. Some items obtainable from this source: *ecofreak*, *hacker-proof*, *laptop*, *mobile phone*, *nouvelle cuisine*, *Pac-Man*, *Silicon Valley*, *Stealth (bomber)*, *Word Star*.

10.

The closing lines of the previous section contain two words that seem to bring to focus two issues central to the thrust of this paper – “qualify” and “list”. So let us ask ourselves with renewed emphasis: what items precisely qualify and why precisely lists?

The first issue – what qualifies? – has been indirectly addressed through the repeated use of ultimately impressionistic labels “eighties-specific” or “relevant for the (American) eighties”, or captions such as “the highlights and trends of the decade”. The truly fundamental consideration here is, of course, the level of eighties literacy aimed at. Rather than balance uncomfortably between the extremes of the “basics” and the “specialist discourse”, let it suffice here that we aim simply at what an averagely educated and averagely sensitive native American knows about the eighties, using an average effort of retrieval. This, however, does not let us off the hook, because all inventories of 80s-specific items, irrespective of their length, will face us with at least two additional problems:

One – do “non-American” items qualify at all, or do we accept only those of them that are universally familiar, that are items of general cultural literacy, as E.D. Hirsch might term it (e.g. Lady Di, Mother Teresa, Halley's Comet, Mathias Rust, Rubik's Cube, Steffi Graf)?

Two – all these inventories have been put together by American individuals or American editorial effort. They thus indirectly reflect an American view of and sensitivity about what items qualify as “80s-specific” or “relevant for the (American) eighties”. Would a non-American have come up with a slightly or significantly different list, and if so would such lists, presumably crosscultural, be intrinsically more valuable?

11.

I would like to offer now an illustration of what a list of items illustrative of the American Eighties – obviously compiled by one or more Americans and including some “non-American” items – might look like. Unfortunately, it is just a snippet, supplied almost as a graphical backdrop to the heading Say Goodbye to the 80s on the cover of

the Washington Post Weekly issue analyzed in this paper. I wish I knew how they had gone about putting it together because the result is just terrific. What they most probably did was just put down names, titles, terms and phrases as they occurred to them - but as they can only occur to somebody native to a civilization. Here it is, the Washington Post Weekly list, in its entirety and the original upper-case version:

DONALD TRUMP BABY M CHOLESTEROL INTIFADA THIRTYSOMETHING
PETE ROSE GRENADA COMPACT DISCS THE CRASH LEVERAGED BUYOUTS
MADONNA PASTA YUPIES THEHOMELESS JERRYFALWELL AIDS OLIVER
NORTH USA TODAY S&Ls IRAN-CONTRA VCRs RONALD REAGAN THE
COSBY SHOW IVAN BOESKY E.T. IMELDA MARCOS RAP MUSIC PAN AM 103
JIM AND TAMMY FAYE WE ARE THE WORLD RAMBO BEIRUT GREENHOUSE
EFFECT BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY INDIANA JONES READ MY LIPS PERSONAL
COMPUTERS CHERNOBYL CNN SUPPLY-SIDE ECONOMICS MTV SOLIDARITY
DONNA RICE EXXON VALDEZ MICHAEL JACKSON JUNK BONDS WHITE
ZINFANDEL TRUST BUT VERIFY JESSE JACKSON CABLE TV IRAN-IRAQ WAR
TRIVIAL PURSUIT GERALDINE FERRARO SALLY RIDE NEW COKE ARSENIO
HALL NIGHTLINE JIM WRIGHT DAY CARE AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI SAFE
SEX GLASNOST AND PERESTROIKA CHALLENGER CRACK COCAINE BATMAN
ACID RAIN WINDOW OF VULNERABILITY ROBERT BORK CABBAGE PATCH
DOLLS BERNHARD GOETZ STEPHEN HAWKING THOUSAND POINTS OF LIGHT
VANESSA WILLIAMS GENETIC ENGINEERING PRINCESS DI GLOBAL WARMING
HBO DR. RUTH EDDIE MURPHY STEROIDS LYNDON LaROUCHE THE
PHANTOM OF THE OPERA FLO-JO DAVID LETTERMAN THE BONFIRE OF THE
VANITIES SPIKE LEE MIKHAIL GORBACHEV TOOTSIE KAL 007 WHERE'S THE
BEEF? MARGARET THATCHER REVENUE ENHANCEMENT MICHAEL DEEVER
BARNEY CLARK UNIVERSAL PRODUCT CODES VANNA WHITE GRAMM-
-RUDMAN-HOLLINGS STAR WARS LEONA HELMSLEY

12.

The second issue, described in the section 10 as central to this paper, is one of format. Why, precisely, structure and offer the items selected as representative of the American 80s in the form of lists? After 1987, when E.D.Hirsch's now famous (opponents say notorious) book *Cultural Literacy*, with its 5,000-item list of "essential names, phrases, dates and concepts" burst upon America - this is an almost superfluous question. Hirsch's list was devised as a tool for measuring a wider literacy (defining cultural literacy briefly as "a grasp of background information that writers and speakers assume their audience already has"). Its general, rather than U.S.-specific, character is best illustrated by the short list on the back cover, inviting the potential buyer to test his cultural literacy:

absolute zero
Alamo
Billy the Kid
carpetbaggers
El Greco
Faust (title)
gamma rays

Homestead Act
Iago
Icarus
jazz
lame duck
manna from heaven
nom de plume

penis envy
rococo
sea legs
tabula rasa
Valhalla
Waterloo, Battle of
Zeitgeist

Of the 21 items only four, maybe six, are specific for the United States: *Alamo*, *Billy the Kid*, *carpetbagger* and *Homestead Act*, with *jazz* and *lame duck* as possible additions.

Nevertheless, the applicability and effectiveness of such cultural items lists for measuring one's own or somebody else's grasp of his native or some alien culture is obvious. What better tool to test both a general and U.S.-specific cultural literacy of an American Studies person? Knowing, really knowing, about a society, being really literate about a society – in our case about American Society – is this not the whole point about American Studies? Performing as well as a native American when tested against Hirsch's Cultural Literacy List, must be rated as an impressive achievement indeed.

Now just imagine an American 1980s-specific list with, say, 300 items – with an averagely educated and averagely alert native American recognizing maybe 275 items, and you doing just as well. Or maybe, just maybe, beating that privileged s.o.b., born into and wallowing all his life in the culture, by a couple of items (*Prince William Sound?* *Vladimir Horowitz?* *Pan Am 103?*). Now, wouldn't that be the ultimate accolade?!

If all this has so far struck you as pretty harmless academic stuff, how about wrapping up this paper, in the way of a punchline, with a cliffhanger story of real, life-and-death relevance of U.S. literacy items? In his novel *Nachruf*, German writer Stefan Heym tells of two trigger-happy American MPs, patrolling the grounds of some allied headquarters during the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes known as the Battle of the Bulge (another U.S. literacy item). Germans have infiltrated the area and the MPs spot an unfamiliar figure who, though in a sloppy American uniform, speaks with a heavy Viennese accent. Now, *we* know that the sad sack is a recent immigrant from Austria but the two MPs do not. So they question him, beginning with what to them is the obvious test of Americanness (we would call it: literacy about the U.S.). "What's Blondie's husband's name?" It is ridiculously easy. Every, but every American knows that the reference is to probably the best-known American comic strip, and that the man's name is Dagwood (Bumstead). But the recent immigrant looks confused and the other, meaner-looking, MP slips the safety catch off. The questioner gives the suspect his second, last, chance: "What is T.S.?" The Viennese-American's eyes light up. "Tough shit!" he yells – and is saved.

Would you have squeaked through, my dear American Studies friends – or would the fat lady have sung for you? (which, of course, is one more U.S. literacy item).

POZNAVANJE AMERIČKIH OSAMDESETH

Rad počinje ukazivanjem na relativno nedavno proširivanje engleskog pojma *literacy* značenjima "temeljna znanja; poznavanje, upućenost u", i pokazuje mogućnost i poželjnost takve upućenosti u jednu samu dekadu. Konkretno, u osamdesete godine ovog stoljeća kao kronološkog odsječka opisa američkog društva viđenog kao složena sociokulturna pojava. Rad prikazuje tehnike koje omogućuju sastavljanje popisa

jedinica značajnih i specifičnih za opis američkih osamdesetih, od najkraćih (7 jedinica) do dugih inventarskih lista koje se približuju Hirschevoj Cultural Literacy List (1987) od 5000 jedinica. Kao mogući izvori građe za pojmovnike specifične za američke osamdesete, u radu se analiziraju osvrti na tu dekadu u informativnim tjednicima, popularnim godišnjacima (almanasima), enciklopedijama i rječnicima neologizama. Na kraju se ističe korisnost takvih lista-pojmovnika za izučavatelje američke civilizacije i naglašavaju se međukulturne implikacije takvih specifičnih korpusa znanja.