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Rhonda Hammer
University of Windsor

Peter McLaren
Chapman University, mclaren@chapman.edu

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THE SPECTACULARIZATION OF
SUBJECTIVITY:
MEDIA KNOWLEDGES,
GLOBAL CITIZENRY,
AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Rhonda Hammer & Peter McLaren

The actants, those structures of narrative action, had to sustain the drama of masculine words and deeds for the most ethereal and most lusted-after of goals—to be seen by all not to have backed down, to have drawn the line in the sand and made the inscription matter. The sands turn to concrete when the manly write in them. These are old, indeed old-fashioned, tendentious, unscrupulously generalizing feminist remarks. They need to be made again, as long as *virtu*, the quality of manliness, means the readiness to kill, that is, to be a replicant, of whatever biological or technological description, in the reproductive dramas of the Father, who forever structures the action in order to produce, again and again, the sacred image of the same. *In saecula saeculorum*. And, ageless, Bush and Saddam Hussein, those two secular figure heads of secular states, each declaring holy war, figured in blinding mirror image as autocrat and democrat, are surely knowingly enmeshed in the brotherly salvation histories that have driven their two Peoples of the Book for centuries.

—Donna Haraway, 1991, pp. 42-43

The subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from its constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity conveniently associated with the feminine, but clearly and not exclusively so. Precisely in this recent war we see the Arab as figured as the abjected Other, a site of homophobic fantasy well made clear in the abundance of bad jokes grounded in the linguistic sliding from Saddam to Sodom.

—Judith Butler, 1991, p. 76

Postmodern wars are not fought for clearly defined goals.

Combatants may well invoke pretexts, but these pretexts are subject to change. As goals change, these wars come to assume an anarchic aspect. Postmodern wars have opened up multiple discursive spaces in which individuals can find agency; women who have always been part of war can find in postmodern war a space to articulate this participation. This articulation threatens to undermine the Homeric war myth, yet it is itself always threatened by the entrenchedness of that archetype. The disenfranchised who before submitted to the distortions of dominant discourse are making their voices heard and their faces seen and thus exposing the mechanisms of power consolidation.

—Miriam Cooke, 1991, p. 27

The Flâneur in Postmodern Culture¹

Our analysis of the media production of the war against Iraq by CNN and its valorization of the viewer as “phallomilitary warrior-citizen” (Cooke, 1991; Butler, 1991) follows the observation by Susan Buck-Morss (1989) that the role of the news reporter as “flâneur-become detective [who] covers the beat” or “photojournalist [who] hangs about like a hunter ready to shoot” has changed as capitalism has expanded into hitherto uncommodified social and cultural realms and has further implicated itself in the signifying practices of mass communication media. We have followed Buck-Morss in tracing the views of Walter Benjamin towards his figure of the flâneur, the “street reader” who strolls ambiguously and ambivalently through the city streets, projecting a “distaste for the industrial labour through which he glides” (Eagleton, 1981: 26) and abandoning himself to the crowd like a commodity.

According to Buck-Morss, Benjamin saw the flâneur in shifting roles, from a “person of leisure (*Musse*)” to someone engaged in “loitering (*Mussigang*)” to the “prototype of the new form of salaried employee who produces news/ literature/ advertisements for the purpose of information/ entertainment/ persuasion” (p. 306). Buck-Morss paints a final portrait of the flâneur as someone whom Benjamin felt advertised not simply commodities but ideological propaganda. Like a “sandwichman” who is “paid to advertise the attractions of mass culture” (pp. 306-307), the flâneur as “journalist-in-uniform” advertises the state and “profits by peddling the ideological fashion” (p. 307).

Benjamin's early depiction of the flâneur, who "moves majestically against that historical grain that would decompose his body into an alien meaning, reduce his numinous presence to an allegory of loss" (Eagleton, p. 154) was a socially rebellious cultural worker, the bohemian prototype—or "ur-form"—of the modern intellectual (Buck-Morss, p. 304). His method of literary production rejected the mandarin status of the metropolitan intellectual and consisted in strolling the city streets and reflecting on the everyday production of cultural life. As Buck-Morss notes, the flâneur's "object of inquiry is modernity itself" (p. 304).

Our understanding of contemporary forms of electronically produced media knowledges has been informed by what we perceive as the changing role of the flâneur in the age of late capitalism—one that is as ominous and drastic as the changes which Benjamin perceived. We suggest that the flâneur no longer provides the service of teaching his or her generation about "their own objective circumstances;" rather, we suggest that the flâneur, as global newscaster, has transmogrified into the afterimage of fascism.

Today we are living in a precarious historical moment in which the flâneur—as signifying agent—is undergoing even further metamorphosis. The postmodern flâneurs of today are corporate individuals cunningly managing and shaping the world of mass-produced images, superannuated servants of the state whose forms of knowledge production are mediated by and fastened securely to the logic of consumption. They still stroll the city streets, as they did in Benjamin's era, but this time they are accompanied by a video production crew and, in times of war, a military censor. Often salaried employees of transnational corporations and other standard bearers of imperialism, the global, postmodern flâneurs serve up insights (to audiences exceeding millions at one viewing) that more often than not mystify and further camouflage race, class, and gender antagonisms, and thereby hinder rather than help viewers understand the conditions of everyday existence.

As reality increasingly becomes confused with the image, and the mediascape becomes the driving force of our time, the image of the postmodern flâneur becomes embodied not in human presence but in human immanence transmuted through an electronic signal, a satellite beam roaming the earth in search of new spectacles through which to present and contain reality. We are entering an age of painful loss of everyday history and shared popular memory that has followed the development of media

technology since the beginning of the century (Schwoch, White and Reilly, in press).

Media knowledges produced by the postmodern flâneur serve as a discourse about action that teleologically fulfills itself in the sense that it recounts an event, that is, in the sense that it *emplots* an event. Yet, paradoxically, it is an emplotment of a history—an event—that is manufactured not simply as narrative but also as mood, as a “structure of feeling.” Often it has no real beginning (*arche*) or end (*telos*) other than the illusion created by the context of its production. The Gordian knot of history is cleaved as history is declared dead in the frozen moment of the image. For instance, the bloody aftermath of the war with Iraq continues today, although the media has officially declared the war to be over.

Media knowledges offered up by the postmodern flâneur—what we refer to as “perpetual pedagogy”—constitute a moving, circulating signwork that possesses a valorizing and legitimating function in the way that it marks off the territory of the real. In the case of the Gulf War, it was able to situate the mobile self of postmodernity in a synecdochial relation to a hyperreal, apocalyptic event, one that came ideologically unannounced yet was able to “cue” both our sign membership and our “affective investment” (Grossberg, 1988) into the political economy of patriotism and global citizenry.

Profane Illumination: Entertainment as the Structuring of Colonialist Modes of Subjectivity

Our previous investigations of the media (Hammer and Wilden, 1987; Giroux and McLaren, in press; 1991; Hammer and McLaren, in press; McLaren and Hammer, 1991) did little to prepare us for the violent semiotics of the media spectacle surrounding the coverage of the Gulf War, especially the way it was able to meld the apocalyptic genre of catastrophe with the nonsense genre of carnival. More specifically, we were struck by the ability of the media to transform the military campaigns in Kuwait and Iraq into a 24-hour advertising spectacle in which the newscaster as postmodern flâneur was reduced to a carnival huckster for patriotic zeal and a salesperson for machineries of destruction and death.

The propagandistic construction of the Gulf War is an extreme example of how the media serves up death for surplus consumption in a politics that centers primarily around the lifestyle industry and what Stuart Ewen (1988: 264) has termed “info-tainment.” As Ewen (p. 265) notes, “in the ratings game, the news—out of

economic necessity—must be transformed into a drama, a thriller, entertainment. Within such a context, the *truth* is defined as *that which sells*” (emphasis original). Especially with reference to the CNN coverage of the war, a kindred range of films and videos dealing with war at a distance (*Top Gun*, *Iron Eagle*, etc.) tacitly co-ordinated the reception of many viewers to the aerial shots of ‘precision’ hits through a superimposition of images and forms of emplotment—memories from postmodern war’s electronic and celluloid Hollywood archive—transforming the war coverage into a type of palimpsest blending the discontinuity of war with the continuity of Western narratives about it.

The mass production of patriotic sentiment and the mobilization of consent that allowed such a disproportionate and excessive use of force to literally disintegrate hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers fleeing north out of Kuwait (described as “one of the most terrible harassments of a retreating army in the history of warfare;” Ellis, Saeeda and Plott, 1991) was, in our minds, unquestionably designed as a *mass advertisement*; the hidden payoff was not the construction of a more critically informed public but rather an electronic display for showcasing weapons of mass destruction in a way that benefitted the arms dealers, the war industry, and a phallic warfare state deploying identities politically and strategically by preparing its citizenry to assume a leadership role in a “new world order.”

Can we tell the difference between actual and simulated war? It is difficult when the investigative gaze of the viewer is replaced by a giddy acquiescence to the accredited expertise of visiting military experts and politicians. This is not to suggest that there exists no readings among viewers that aggravate the techno-ideological thrust of the programming but rather that the static and retrospective character of news shows is often enough to smudge the boundary between *doxa* and *episteme*. Spectacles do not invite situating information into a context. This was most evident in CNN’s use of dazzling optical effects as exploding bombs and tracer bullets became luminously pock-marked against darkened skies while the Iraqi soldiers remained largely invisible except perhaps as oneiric battlefield abstractions that resembled the ovaloid forms of Oliver Wascow photographs.

The “totally administered stylistic environment” of the newscast is one of the best entertainment formats for promulgating “cognitive confusion” and geopolitical misunderstanding. Ewen (1988: 265) remarks:

The highly stylized signature of the news program offers the only overarching principle of cohesion and meaning. Again, surface makes more sense than substance. The assembled facts, as joined together by the familiar, formulaic, and authoritative personality of "The News," becomes the most accessible version of the larger reality that most Americans have at their disposal. Consciousness *about the world* is continually drawn away from a geopolitical understanding of events as they take place in the world. As nations and people are daily sorted out into boxes marked "good guys," "villains," "victims," and "lucky ones," style becomes the essence, reality becomes appearance.

Investment in imperialism is important for the United States in order to retain its superpower status since it cannot compete successfully with Japan and Germany's demilitarized economies. We view the war coverage on CNN and other stations as a global media advertising campaign for sophisticated weapons technology—technology now being sold to countries inhabiting the Gulf region and elsewhere (i.e., Israel and Turkey). The Gulf War spectacle, in this sense, reflected the global push of transnational capital in the information-cultural sphere primarily through the transformation of the "theater" of battle into an international market economy. It was an advertisement for the "new world order" of Western-structured development and incorporation into the dominant world business order. Yet the kind of new world order to which the Gulf War pointed was framed by a gaudy sideshow of flags, emblems, and military hardware—a counterfeit democracy produced through media knowledges able to effectively harness the affective currency of popular culture such that the average American's investment in being "American" reached an unparalleled high which has not been approximated since the years surrounding the post-WWII McCarthy hearings.

Doublespeak: the New Language of Democracy

The success of the advertising campaign surrounding both the "selling" and the "displaying" of the Gulf War was largely due to the strategic use of doublespeak to disguise from television viewers the extent of the real terror and carnage of the military campaign against Iraq. When a euphemism is used to mislead or deceive, it becomes doublespeak. William Lutz (1981: 1) writes that doublespeak

is a language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is a language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it.

For instance, Lutz reports that in 1984 the US State Department announced it would no longer use the word "killing" in its annual report on the status of human rights in countries around the world. Instead, it chose to employ the term "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life." While the State Department claimed that this was a more accurate description of the condition, the term actually functioned to direct attention away from the embarrassing situation of government-sanctioned killings in countries supported by the United States and who have been certified by the United States as respecting the human rights of its citizens (p. 3). "Radiation enhancement device" is a term that has been used by Pentagon officials to nuclear bombs. The neutron bomb was called a "cookie cutter" because it could kill people inside less than a three-quarter-mile radius without harming allied soldiers and civilians nearby.

Doublespeak occurs through the use of terms that are to a large extent technically true but which serve to function as a lie. For instance, a profit may be described as a "negative deficit;" euphemisms for firing staff may be described as "staff reduction," "non-retention," "dehiring," or "rationalizing of resources."

During the media's production of the Gulf War, there existed, in the words of Carol E. Cohn (1991: 88), a "reversal of metaphors between sentient beings and insentient things." For example, the term "air support" overlooks the devastation and loss of life during bombing raids; "collateral damage" refers to civilian deaths; "incontinent ordinances" are bombs or missiles that hit allied troops under conditions of "friendly fire"; a "party" is a battle; "bags of tools" refers to weapons; "theater of operations" to a battlefield; "surgical strike" refers to precision bombing; and "delivering a package" to dropping bombs.

Cohn (p. 88) describes a radio news briefing on the Persian Gulf as "Madison Avenue's idea of a housewife's dream: General Colin Powell talks about fighting in a "sanitary fashion." The air force launches "surgically clean strikes." Instead of bombing the Iraqi troops, US forces are "flying sorties," "engaging" the enemy, "taking out" Iraqi "assets," "servicing" targets, and "softening up" the Republican Guard. Iraqi soldiers do not blow

up when they are hit by bombs or missiles. Instead, their “emplacements absorb the munitions” (p. 88). Human beings become insentient things while weapons become the living actors of war. “Smart” weapons that have eyes and computer “brains” make the decision when and where to drop seven and a half tons of bombs, taking away the moral responsibility of the combatants themselves (p. 88).

CNN’s spectacularization of the Gulf War managed to position the viewer so that to be against it was to be ‘biased’ and to be in favor of it was to be ‘objective.’ Its narrative apparatus with its apparent realism, or representationality, not only restructured our feelings surrounding the historical conditions being played out but through strategies of indirection and disinformation was also able to mobilize particular economies of affect. Again, our argument is that the war could be read as one large advertisement that served as unquestionably the “best show in town.” Just as sure as US bombs obliterated Iraqi soldiers and civilians, the media’s war obliterated the particular historical and political background of Western imperialism that served as the context for the actual fighting. In the words reminiscent of an advertisement, Richard Blystone of CNN (1/2/91) described a “Scud” missile as “a quarter-ton of concentrated hatred” while the Patriot missile was described by *USA Today* (1/22/91) as “three inches longer than a Cadillac Sedan de Ville” (Naureckas, 1991).

It is ironic if not profoundly disturbing that the substanceless unreality of the Gulf War—its hyperreality—has become the metanarrative for a renewed US patriotism and the meaning of citizenship. The construction of patriotism through the production of media unreality works—has meaning—as long as the viewer does not know his or her desire is being mobilized and structured through the advertisement mode of information. According to Mark Poster (1990: 63):

As ad after ad is viewed, the representational critical gradually loses interest, becomes lulled into a noncritical stance, is bored, and gradually receives the communication differently...the ad only works to the extent that it is not understood to be an ad, not understood instrumentally. Through its linguistic structure the TV ad communicates at a level other than the instrumental which is placed in brackets. Floating signifiers, which have no relation to the product, are set in play; images and words that convey desirable or undesirable states of being

are portrayed in a manner that optimizes the viewer's attention without arousing critical awareness.

A communication is enacted, in the TV ad, which is not found in any context of daily life. An unreal is made real, a set of meanings is communicated which is more real than reality.

The Mass Spectacle as Totemic Advertisement

Perhaps the most important point to be made about the construction of subjectivity through media as a form of advertisement is its religious function. As Sut Jhally (1990: 202) has noted in his historical tracing of the person-object relation in advertisements, advertisements now function as a form of *totemism* in which "utility, symbolization and personalization are mixed and remixed under the sign of the group." Products no longer become venerated for their utility, their value as icons, or their power as fetishes; rather, they now serve in the post-Fordist service economy as a badge of a group—a *form of shared lifestyle*. New world order patriots are now held together by lifestyle rather than particular political commitments. For example, Arnold Schwarzenegger recently purchased a special jeep (nicknamed the "Hummer") used in the Gulf War by US troops for his own personal use. In New York City, manufacturers of bullet proof vests are starting *special fashion lines* for toddlers and elementary school children who might accidentally absorb stray bullets from homeboy dealers in pumps, ten-dollar gold tooth caps and who carry customized AK 47 assault rifles. The guns are not lifestyle accessories—yet. But gas masks are. New York celebrity fashion designer, Andre Van Pier, has recently announced a new Spring fashion line based on the theme of "Desert Storm." It attempts to capture the "Gulf War look." Fashion accessories revealed include neon-colored gas masks slung renegade-chic over the shoulder. To add insult to injury, a major New York baseball card manufacturer has revealed a new line of Gulf War cards that are supposed to be "educational." Of course, the cards include photos of all the major US war hardware and portraits of the American Generals, but the only item represented from Iraq in this 'educational' collection is a "Scud" missile.

The Gulf War was packaged for US viewers in the form of the lifestyle politics of watching football spectacles. According to Ernest Larsen (1991: 5), following the Gulf War Superbowl, January, 1991, "General Schwarzkopf explain[ed] the fine points of bombing runs, with the same delivery style and the same

instant replay as the network football commentators have just used." Further, he notes that the idiom used on television to describe the war

also evoked the jingoist jocksniffery of football announcers. The emphasis on number, names, and stats, on graphics, plays, and kicking ass, and later, on "cutting it off and killing it," in Colin Powell's unstudied phrase, are all derived from the sports world, that sweaty utopia of repressed homoerotic ritual combat made up of grown-up males in uniforms whose entire livelihood is concentrated on their ability to use their fetishized bodies with the forceful precision of high-tech weapons. At one point Bush even called the war his Super Bowl. (p. 8)

Television Reality as the Discourse of the Other

Soon after the war ended, our students (both from our respective classrooms in Canada and the United States) began to express regret that they could no longer return to their television sets with the same mixture of commitment and enjoyment that many of them confided they reserved only for their favorite soap operas. CNN's staged desire in its coverage of the war had presented them with unambiguous co-ordinates to construct *national economies of affect* in the form of binary oppositions (patriot/traitor; good/evil; Christian/Muslim; democracy/dictatorship; liberators/enslaved). Hussein was compared to other dark-skinned leaders such as Idi Amin, Qaddafi and Noriega while the only European who made this rogues gallery was Stalin (Shohat, 1991). As Shohat points out, television anchors in the US followed George Bush in calling Hussein by his first name—"Sadd'm"—in order to evoke a series of associations such as Satan, Damn, and Sodom. How many television anchors have you heard refer to George Bush as George? Furthermore, it is interesting to note why Hussein was never compared to Hitler when he was armed by the US and when he used chemical weapons against Iranians and Kurds. Why, for instance, did television archives reveal the brutal consequences of chemical warfare by using images from WWI or from the Iran-Iraq war while avoiding any images of destruction caused by Agent Orange or napalm during Vietnam strikes (Shohat, 1991: 137)? Shohat (1991:37) further notes that

the Hussein-Hitler analogy prolonged the historical intertext of Israeli and American imagery linking Arabs to Nazis. This link, both metonymic and metaphoric, had

been a staple of didactic Israeli films (*Hill 24 Doesn't Answer, Rebels, Against the Light*) as well as of Hollywood cinema (*Ship of Fools, Exodus, Raiders of the Lost Ark*).

The use of warring oppositions such as “good/evil” and “democracy/dictatorship” to frame associations between Hussein and Hitler served to decontextualize and dehistoricize the events surrounding the war and to effectively “symmetrize” existing relations of power and privilege in the Gulf region. For instance, by establishing chains of equivalences between the war in the Gulf and WWII, the colonial and neo-colonial legacy of European nations who “parcelled up” the inhabitants of the Ottoman empire and installed monarchies and regimes loyal to the imperial powers was successfully elided. This made it easier for typical colonial narratives to be constructed such as “the rescue of white or dark women from a dark rapist” under the metaphor, “the rape of Kuwait,” which followed the “historical oversexualization of Blacks and Indians...[which was continued]...in the image of Saddam and the Arabs” (Shohat, p. 140).

The colonial narratives played out for American viewers during CNN's production of the Gulf War echoed the way in which contemporary forms of media knowledges reproduce national images of citizenship such as those modelled on the John-Wayneing of America and captured in the renumerative cliches, “Go for it!” and “Go ahead. Make my day!” Rocky Balboa's “Go for it!” (which has become the clarion call for the US brand of rugged individualism) and Clint Eastwood's “Go ahead. Make my day!” adorn the discursive fountainhead of United States bravado culture. These slogans have become cultural aphorisms that reveal a great deal about the structural unconscious of the United States. Both Ronald Reagan and George Bush have referred to “Go ahead. Make my day!” during their time in office. When Clint Eastwood delivered his famous lines in the movie, *Sudden Impact* (made during the Reagan presidency), he is daring a Black man to murder a woman so that he (Dirty Harry) can kill him. As Michael Rogin (1990) has pointed out, Dirty Harry is willing to sacrifice women and people of color in the name of his own courage. Reagan had made women and Black people his targets by destroying their welfare-state tax benefits—an act he was defending when he dared his detractors to “Make my day!” Similarly, George Bush made the Black criminal and white rapist of *Sudden Impact* into the figure of Willie Horton, as

he attempted for the first time to organize American politics around the ominous image of interracial rape (Rogin, 1990).

With the upcoming 1992 election campaign in mind, Bush appears to be using the issue of racial hiring quotas in order to achieve a similar effect—the fear of darker-skinned immigrants taking away jobs from better qualified white people. And he will undoubtedly use Gulf War footage to remind Americans that they are back on top as a world military power and that future threats from dark-skinned peoples (whether Latinos, African-Americans, or native Americans inside its borders or Arabs or South Americans outside its borders) will be met with a force as swift and as deadly as that of Desert Storm.

The coverage of the Gulf War recalled the warning sounded by the 1975 Trilateral Commission that claimed that the electronic media were creating situations of surplus democracy that made the United States more difficult to govern because television was becoming too adversarial and challenging leadership practices, policy initiatives, and delegitimizing established institutions (Kellner, 1990: pp. 6-7). In the case of the Gulf War, only 1.5 percent of network sources protested the war, about the same number as the sources who were asked about how the war had affected their travel plans (Naureckas, 1991: 5). The Brookings Institute, which was the most important think tank consulted by the media during the Gulf War, was passed off as a think tank of the left. Representatives from Brookings were called upon to debate those from hard-line conservative think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the American Enterprise Institute. However, the Brookings Institute has been “an institution of the center-right for more than a decade” (Soley, 1991: 6). In fact, topping the list of corporate donors to Brookings were media corporations “which drew heavily on Brookings for ‘liberal’ opinions and sound bites” (ibid.).

It should come as little surprise that views from an authentic progressive think tank such as the Institute for Policy Studies were rarely solicited or cited. In fact, “In seven months of the conflict, IPS was cited 26 times by six major papers (6 percent of Brookings’ citations); in the first month, not one IPS representative appeared on a nightly newscast” (Soley, 1991, p. 6).

The New Right and the Deformation of Reality

“And we’ve now moved what amounts to a medium-size American city completely capable of defending itself all

the way over to the Middle East.”

—President George Bush

Statement to the press about the US military deployment in Saudi Arabia, Kennebunkport, Maine, 22 August, 1990, as cited in O.K. Werckmeister, *Citadel Culture*, p. 187.

The New Right has used the media effectively (and affectively) not simply to transform war into a spectacle of national unity based on the Manichean grandeur of good triumphing over evil; nor have they used the media primarily to turn generals into talk-show guests through the prodigious use of high-tech image consultants (although they have done both very successfully; see Giroux and McLaren, 1989). Even more impressively, the New Right has been able to seduce Americans through the media to retreat into cultural nostalgia and social amnesia as a way of draining attention away from escalating social problems such as rising incidents of racism in urban settings, growing numbers of homeless, and the devastation of AIDS. Part of this has to do with the media's ability to reduce the historical present to a collage of images, a symbiotic coupling of machine and body, a new cult of the simulacrum.

Kellner (1990) claims that under the control of multinational capital, the media have effectively served as ideological mouthpieces for Reagan/Bush disinformation and in so doing have helped to forge a conservative ideological hegemony—what Schiller (1989) calls the “shadowy but many-tentacled disinformation industry.” Kellner writes:

It is a historical irony that the 1980s marked the defeat of democracy by capitalism in the United States and the triumph of democracy over state communism in the Soviet bloc countries. At present, the “free” television media in the United States are probably no more adversarial and no less propagandistic than *Pravda* or the television stations in the Eastern European countries. Hence the very future of democracy is at stake—and development of a democratic communications system is necessary if democracy is to be realized. (p. 219)

Certainly recent events surrounding the official US media censorship imposed by the military during the Gulf War has largely confirmed Kellner's pronouncement. However, the latest victory of the New Right's media disinformation/propaganda campaign has been through the invention of and concurrent

attack upon what has been called the repressive 'left mandarin' regime of 'political correctness' that is supposedly sweeping North American university campuses. This so-called movement embraces every hate-provoking stereotype of every alleged 'radical' imaginable. Educators who work in the public schools and the universities are currently witnessing a well-orchestrated and singularly scandalous assault on efforts by progressive educators to make race, class, and gender issues central to the curriculum. The new left literacies that have been influenced by continental social theory, feminist theory and critical social theory in its many forms (postmodernist, post-colonialist and post-structuralist, etc.) are being characterized by New Right critics as a subversion of the political neutrality and ideological disinterestedness that they claim the enterprise of education should be all about.

Media Literacy as Counter-hegemonic Practice

Largely because of the way in which the media function to shape and merchandize morality and to construct forms of citizenship and individual and collective identity, our understanding of the meaning and importance of democracy has become impoverished in proportion to its dissolution and retreat from contemporary social life. Today's social ugliness that makes the bizarre appear normal is no longer just a surrealist fantasy, a proto-surrealist spin-off, or a Baudrillardian rehearsal for a futureless future. This scenario *is* the present historical moment, one that has arrived in a body bag—unravelling and stomped on by the logic of the fascist's steel-toed boot. Serial killer Ted Bundy has donated his multiple texts of identity to our structural unconscious and we are living them.

Current forms of collective sociality have been brought under the *nouvelle* aesthetic sign-form of Madonna's hyper-bra and Arnold Schwarzenegger's replicant super-cut biceps—part of a new politics of voyeurism and exhibitionism that celebrates the culture of commodified flesh over the emancipation of the body politic. We rehearse our lives under these signs rather than live them; we become curators and custodians of the detritus produced by the radical semiurgy that characterizes our current epoch rather than shapers of a new social vision. We have become unwanted visitors in the house of technology.

The fantasies of De Sade have become the urban equivalent of postmodern city life as affluent neighborhoods of the cyber-bourgeoise brush shoulders with the post-holocaust landscape of ravaged inner cities, creating new forms of envy and disgust.

Given the current condition of *fin-de-siecle* ennui and paranoia, we have arrived at the zero-degree reality of the kind that once only graced the pages of surrealist manifestos and punk fanzines. Andre Breton's "simplest surrealist act"—firing a pistol into a crowd of strangers—is no longer just a turn-of-the-century symbolic disruption of the grudgingly mundane or a symbolic dislocation circulating in avant garde broadsheets. It is precisely in this current conjuncture that people really *are* shooting blindly into crowds: at children in hamburger establishments, at lunchtime patrons in small town diners, at employees and employers in factories, at teachers and classmates in schools, at college administrators, and at female engineering students in university seminar rooms. In the nihilistic extrapolation of the mass produced image as the emergent norm of postmodern subjectivity, we witness the eclipse of historical agency and the shrinkage of the democratic imaginary.

In the current historical juncture of democratic decline in the United States, ideals and images have become detached from their anchorage in stable and agreed-upon meaning and associations and are now beginning to assume a reality of their own. The self-referential world of the media is one that splinters, obliterates, peripheralizes, partitions and segments social space, time, knowledge, and subjectivity in order to unify, encompass, entrap, totalize and homogenize them *through the meta-form of entertainment*. What needs to be addressed is the way in which capitalism is able to secure this cultural and ideological totalization and homogenization through its ability to insinuate itself into social practices and private perceptions through various forms of media knowledges. Questions that need to be asked include: How are the subjectivities and identities of individuals and the production of media knowledges within popular culture mutually articulated? To what extent does the hyperreal correspond to practices of self and social constitution in contemporary society? Do we remain "sunk in the depressing hyperbole of the hyperreal" (Poster, 1990: 66), encysted in the monologic self-referentiality of the mode of information? Or do we establish a politics of refusal that is able to contest the tropes that govern Western colonialist narratives of supremacy and oppression? What isn't being discussed is the pressing need within pedagogical sites for creating a media literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses so that they no longer possess the power to infantilize the population and continue to create passive and paranoid social subjects (McLaren and Hammer, 1991; Hammer and McLaren, 1991).

In its unannounced retreat over the past decade, democracy has managed to recreate power through the spectacularization of its after-image, that is, through corporatized image management and the creation of national myths of identity, primarily through mass media techniques that give democracy an "after-glow" once it has faded from the horizon of concrete possibility. In other words, the mandarins of media have created democracy as a "necessary illusion." Herman and Chomsky (1988: xi) note:

If...the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to "manage" public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.

A critical media literacy recognizes that we inhabit a photocentric, aural, and televisual culture in which the proliferation of photographic and electronically produced images and sounds serves as a form of media catechism—perpetual pedagogy—through which individuals ritually encode and evaluate the engagements they make in the various discursive contexts of everyday life (McLaren, 1986; Giroux and McLaren, in press; Giroux and McLaren, 1991; McLaren, 1988). It is a form of literacy that understands media representations—whether photographs, television, print, film, or another form—as not merely productive of knowledge but also of subjectivity. John B. Thompson (1990) has sketched out some elements of the media literacy we have in mind.

Following Thompson, we suggest that a media literacy must elucidate the typical modes of appropriation of mass-mediated products (i.e., the technical media of transmission, the availability of the skills, capacities and resources required to decode the messages transmitted by particular media and the rules, conventions and practical exigencies associated with such decoding). In other words, how do particular individuals throughout the course of their everyday existence receive ritualized messages and integrate them on a daily basis (see McLaren, 1985)? Individuals do not soak up messages as passive onlookers or "inert sponges," but rather engage in an ongoing process of interpreting and incorporating such messages. A critical media literacy must therefore be attentive to the social-historical characteristics of contexts of reception and see them as *situated practices*. Here Thompson refers to the spatial and temporal features of reception (in the case of TV, for instance, we

would be concerned with who watches, for how long, in what contexts); the relations of power and the distribution of resources among recipients; the social institutions within which individuals appropriate mediated knowledges; as well as the systematic asymmetries and differentials that characterize the contexts of reception.

A critical media literacy must also relate the everyday understanding of media messages to social-historical characteristics (i.e., race, class, and gender characteristics). It must analyze how mediated messages are discursively elaborated as individuals reject or incorporate them as part of their everyday social practices. And finally, a critical media literacy needs to explore how the appropriation of mediated messages creates *virtual communities* of recipients that are extended across time and space. Such a media literacy seeks to move beyond Eco's suggestion of creating a "semiological guerrilla movement" based on an anarchistic individualism in which each recipient of mediated messages interprets the transmitted multiplicity of images whichever way he or she chooses (Kearney, 1988). Rather, the critical media literacy that we envision seeks to create communities of resistance, counter-public spheres, and oppositional pedagogies that can resist dominant forms of meaning by offering new channels of communication, circuits of semiotic production, codifications of experience, and perspectives of reception which unmask the political linkage between images, their means of production and reception, and the social practices they legitimate.

However, the credibility of our critical pedagogy of media literacy is handicapped by a formidable paradox: within certain academic and pedagogical circles, the very recognition of media as powerful hegemonic apparatuses impairs the validity of doing media studies in that those who critique television and other media apparatuses are often seen as complicitous with those very structures of domination that they seek to contest. In addition to constructing a model of media power that speaks to the legitimacy of engaging in a cultural studies approach, a critical media literacy needs to address sufficiently *the specificity and partial autonomy of media discourses*, that is, a model that "would analyze how the media produce identities, role models, and ideals; how they create new forms of discourse and experience; how they define situations, set agendas, and filter out oppositional ideas; and how they set limits and boundaries beyond which political discourse is not allowed" (Kellner, 1990: 18).

Of serious concern in our own work is how electronic prophets who manufacture personalities and manage person images have been able to turn wimp Presidents into wrathful avengers and a frustrated and self-hating citizenry into phallomilitary warrior citizens who are currently being conditioned to re-direct a media-instilled hatred of "Sad'am" against a familiar enemy within its own ranks: the poor, the homeless, people of color, those who comprise the detritus of capitalism and white man's democracy, those who are already oppressed by race, gender, caste, and circumstance. After all, what is the mission of postmodern media if not the attempt to "Americanize the un-American through particular forms of cultural assertion linked to capital and patterns of consumption but also on a grander scale to interlocking international networks of finance and surveillance.

Needed is a counter-hegemonic media literacy in which subjectivities may be lived and analyzed outside the dominant regime of official print culture—a culture that is informed by a technophobic retreat from emerging techno-aesthetic cultures of photography, film, and electronically mediated messages. Different media knowledges manage to reveal in different ways what is at stake in naming ourselves as gendered, sexual, and desiring body/subjects. Not only would a critical media literacy warn us of the dangers in constructing social practices that enforce misogynous, homophobic, and patriarchal acts of naming, it would also construct the grounds for a transformative and emancipatory politics of difference (McLaren, forthcoming). Much of this work necessarily involves not only understanding the disabling and emancipatory potential of the media knowledges that are available to us, but also the importance of struggling to overturn current arrangements of extra-communicational forms of power and the social relations that undergird—and in some instances help to overdetermine—the production of such knowledges. In this regard, a critical pedagogy of media literacy seeks to produce partial, contingent, but necessary historical truths that will provide some of the necessary conditions for the emancipation of the many public spheres that make up our social and institutional life, truths which—unlike those created and sponsored by the media—recognize their social constructedness and historicity and the institutional and social arrangements that they help to legitimate.

While the development of a critical media literacy is an important condition for an emancipatory politics, it is not the sole enabling condition or productive agent for transforming history.

Yet it may take us one step further in recuperating the critical sensibility that Benjamin's flâneur might have once possessed.

NOTE

1This section is a further development of Giroux and McLaren, "Introduction" to *Media Knowledges* by Schwoch, White and Reilly, op. cit.

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