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SERIAL KILLER PEDAGOGY

Peter McLaren

I will not mince my words. We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering, dispossession, and contempt for human dignity and the sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain a ubiquitous feature of our time. Our much heralded form of democracy has become, unbeknownst to many Americans, subverted by its contradictory relationship to the very object of it address: human freedom, social justice, and a tolerance and respect for difference. In the current historical juncture, discourses of democracy continue to masquerade as disinterested solicitations, and to reveal themselves as incommensurable with the struggle for social equality. The reality and promise of democracy in the United States has been invalidated by the ascendancy of new postmodern institutionalizations of brutality and the proliferation of new and sinister structures of domination. This has been followed by an ever fainter chorus of discontent as the voices of the powerless and the marginalized grow increasingly despondent or else are clubbed into oblivion by the crackling swiftness of police batons.

Predatory Culture: Ready, Aim, Fire!

Although pain and suffering continue to pollute the atmosphere of social justice in the West, the dream of democracy and the struggle to bring it about has taken on a new intensity, as recent events in Eastern Europe attest. In its unannounced retreat in the United States over the past decade, democracy has managed to recreate power through the spectacularization of its after-image, that is, through image management and the creation of new national myths of identity primarily through the techniques of the mass media.

The prevailing referents around which the notion of public citizenry is currently constructed have been steered in the ominous direction of the social logic of production and consumption. Buyers are beginning to merge culturally with their commodities while human agency is becoming

absorbed into the social ethics of the marketplace. Social impulses for equality, liberty, and social justice have been flattened out by the mass media until they have become cataleptically rigid while postmodern images threaten to steal what was once known as the "soul."

We now inhabit predatory culture. Predatory culture is a field of invisibility—of stalkers and victims—precisely because it is so obvious. It's obviousness immunizes its victims against a full disclosure of its menacing capabilities.

In predatory culture identity is fashioned mainly and often violently around the excesses of marketing and consumption and the natural social relations of post-industrial capitalism. Life is lived through speed technology in anticipation of recurring accidents of identity and endless discursive collisions with otherness because it is virtually impossible in predatory culture to be cotermporal with what one both observes and desires. Predatory culture is the left-over detrius of bourgeois culture stripped of its arrogant pretense to civility and cultural lyricism and replaced by a stark obsession with power fed by the voraciousness of capitalism's global voyage.

It is a culture of universalism compressed into local time. The predatory culture naturalized by and entrenched in primitive accumulation has exceeded even its own wildest fantasies of acquisition and has dropped its facade of civility and its window-dressing compassion. It can stand naked in its unholy splendor; it can make no claims to be just and fair; it can now survive without artifice or camouflage.

Abandoning the historical criteria for making ethical judgments, predatory culture—refuses to wager on the side of radical hope; instead, it cleaves false hope out of the excrement of image-value. It collapses all distinctions between the real and the imaginary, and seeks to conceal under its cloven hoof its own simulating activity. Predatory culture is the Great Deceiver. It marks the ascendancy of the dehydrated imagination that has lost its capacity to dream otherwise. It is the culture of eroticized victims and decaffeinated revolutionaries. We are all its sons and daughters.

The capitalist fear that fuels predatory culture is made to function at the world level through the installation of necessary crises, both monetary and social. Computers have become the new entrepreneurs of history

while their users have been reduced to scraps of figurative machinery, partial subjects in the rag and bone shop of predatory culture, manichean allegories of "us" against "them," of "self" against "other." The social, the cultural, and the human have been subsumed within capital. This is predatory culture. Have fun.

Given the current condition of end-of-the-century ennui and paranoia, we have arrived at the zero-degree reality of the kind that once only graced the pages of surrealist manifestos or punk fanzines. Andre Breton's "simplest Surrealist act"—firing a pistol into a crowd of strangers—is no longer just a symbolic disruption of the grudgingly mundane aspects of everyday life or a symbolic dislocation circulating in avant garde broadsheets. It is precisely in the current North American historical conjuncture that people are really shooting blindly into crowds: at children in hamburger establishments, at employees and employers in factories, at teachers and classmates in schools, at civil servants in employment offices and at female engineering students in university seminar rooms. In Montreal, at Ecole Polytechnique, Marc Lepine massacres fourteen women because of their gender. And in the United States, thrill-seeking arsonists destroy thousands of homes in Los Angeles and the Southern California coastline. In some urban settings, children are murdering other children for their status-line foot gear—not to mention the lurid reality of LA. "drive-bys."

In Ohio, a five year-old boy set a fire that killed his baby sister, apparently through the influence of *Beavis and Butthead*.

A new secret weapon has been unveiled by the FBI: the music of Mitch Miller. The old-time friendly sounds that Americans used to "sing along with" while following the bouncing dots that kept them in time with the words were blasted at David Koresh and his Branch Davidians (apparently, to no avail) as a form of psychological torture.

Lorena Bobbitt becomes enshrined as an emblem of radical feminist resistance; Mr. Bobbitt's penis surgery does more damage to Freud's castration complex than the controversial theories of Jeffrey Masson.

Chart-topping pop songs replace somber hymns at British funerals: a recent survey by the Cremation Society reveals that songs by Whitney Houston, Kylie Minogue and Phil Collins are among the most frequently requested songs at funerals, prompting crematorium managers to invest

considerable sums of money in high-tech CD players.

Esteemed scientists are helping to propel genetics into the age of the body-as-theme-park. Stargene Company, co-founded by a United States Nobel-Prize-winning scientist, plans to market celebrity DNA strands as fetish objects for the star-struck. DNA will be magnified and mass produced for public consumption until it is visible to the eye, then laminated alongside a photo and a short biography of the star.

In New York City, manufacturers of bullet proof vests are starting special fashion lines for toddlers and elementary school children who might absorb stray bullets from homeboy dealers in pumps and ten dollar gold tooth caps and who carry customized AK 47 assault rifles. The guns are not fashion accessories—yet. But gas masks are. After the war in Iraq, New York celebrity fashion designer Andre Van Pier announced a new spring fashion line based on the theme of "Desert Storm." Its stated intent was to capture the "Gulf War look." Fashion accessories included neon-colored camouflage pattern, canteen purses, and gas masks slung renegade-chic over the shoulder. About the same time, a major New York manufacturer of baseball cards revealed a new line of Gulf War cards that are supposed to be "educational." Included were photos of the major American military hardware and portraits of the generals but the only item represented from Iraq in the collection was a "scud" missile.

In the winter of 1993, just as Attorney General Dan Lungren was to arrive at a Long Beach, California high school to speak about the dangers of guns, a teenager is shot in front of a Long Beach high school while trying to register.

Today's social ugliness that makes the bizarre appear normal is no longer just a (white, male) surrealist fantasy or 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—unraveled and stomped on by the logic of a steel-toed boot. Serial killer Ted Bundy has donated his multiple texts of identity to our structural unconscious and we are living them. We are now in the age of recombinant subjectivity. There is no escape. A funky nihilism has set in; an aroma of cultural disquiet. Marc Lepine and the Russian cannibal mass murderer, Andre Chikatilo, live comfortably in the interstices of our

manufactured desires, waiting to audition for the role of central protagonist in the agitated dramas of our daily existence and the next TV movie.

Recently the Galerie at Tatou in Beverly Hills, hangout for movie stars and venture capitalists and other "fun" people, was selling the paintings of serial killer, John Wayne Gacy. Gacy was recently executed by lethal injection for the sex-torture slayings of 33 boys and young men in the Chicago area. For as little as \$10,000 per painting, it's possible to purchase Gacy's illustrations of Christ, Elvis, a skull with blood-dripping teeth called "Jeffrey Dahmer Skull," Adolf Hitler, and the smiling seven Dwarfs rendered in bright colors. A special item in the collection and a consistent best seller is Gacy's painting of Pogo the clown. (Gacy enticed many of his victims to his homes using Pogo the Clown routines.) Gacy can be considered a "star" of promotional, predatory culture for the considerable success he enjoyed in strangling all but one of his victims by wrapping a rope around their necks and twisting it with a stick prior, during, or shortly after having sex with them.

There is a yearning in predatory culture for a daily apocalypse where salvation is unnecessary because chaos is always sublime, morality is frictionless and heaven can always be had, MTV-style, between a pair of bubble shaped buttocks. If you're in doubt, just witness music video's reverential display of holy buns, the hard, glistening, ghetto onions on rap videos that make grown men groan for babes who got "back." Buttocks have become the new icons of social resurrection, the cultural promise that will selflessly defy gravity for us—just to keep us feeling young and satisfied.

Hair stylists are also giving the social order new hope for redemption. Jose Eber, famous for his teal-colored eyes and beauty salon in Beverly Hills, and who specializes in trichology (the study of hair and scalp), facials using aroma therapy, Balayage hair painting, and manicure and pedicure, has found a solution to the violence in Los Angeles: he gives "empowering makeovers" to battered women who live in inner city shelters. Just prior to Gacy's execution, just about any predator could be empowered by phoning 1-900-622-GACY, to listen to a recording of Gacy's voice. They could let their fantasies of having sex with a serial killer fly loose and easy in the privacy of their bedrooms. It cost a mere

\$1.99 per minute and was more fun than being pampered by a hairstylist—even a famous one.

The unsettling contradictions of our age are reflected in the transnational assault on "difference"—that form of difference that eludes the profit motive or refuses commodification or revision in the interests of the logic of capital. Feelings of despair about the global condition have gone high-tech: we can now eroticize our depression and rearrange and reterritorialize our feelings by entraining our central nervous system with the electromagnetic spectrum via TV waves and fending off depression with designer MTV moods.

In Los Angeles, Aurelia Macias, a Mexican immigrant and battered wife, snipped off her husband's testicles with a pair of scissors as, she claimed, he was about to rape her. According to newspaper reports, the male prosecuting attorney told her she could have easily escaped her abusive husband by leaving him and working "as a cleaning lady." It was the same attorney who reportedly snapped at a female psychologist serving as a witness: "You're a woman. You know about jealousy." Ms. Aurelia was acquitted of the most serious charges. Hollywood might work this into an episode of *LA Law*.

An eighth-grader at Mary McLeod Bethune Middle School, Astrianna Johnson, is reportedly suing the Los Angeles Unified School District for preventing her from wearing packaged condoms on her clothes and shoes to promote safe sex and AIDS awareness among her fellow students. L.A. can be a cruel place for those who want to make awareness legal.

We now live in an age where we can make our own dreams come true. In Inglewood, California, a woman recently turned forty and because she had not yet found a man to marry, she married herself. She had a three-tiered wedding cake at the ceremony, and was probably unaware of the implications her actions had for Lacanian feminists. Also in California, the Supreme Court upheld the right of a dead man to leave his sperm to whomever he desires.

Next on *Geraldo*: Serial Killer Cooking Tips

The erosion of the American dream has forced today's youth to occupy, if not a dystopian parody of *The Cosby Show*, then paracriminal

subcultures of sardonic nihilism focusing on drugs and violence, apotheosized in movies like *A Clockwork Orange* and *Colors*. Corporate rock's celebration of the subversion of adult authority gives its youthful listeners the illusion of resistance but not a language of critique or hope. It works to produce a politics of pleasure but simultaneously functions as a form of repression and forgetting—a motivated social amnesia and forced disavowal of the nation's complicitousness in racial demonization and colonialism. Narcissistic entrepreneurs of hype and ideology, Camille Paglia, Howard Stern, and Rush Limbaugh are all on the nation's bestseller lists. Children are collecting trading cards of serial killers. University students read Mexican deformity comics during lunch breaks along with *American Psycho* and *Zen Gives You the Competitive Edge*. Afraid of falling prey to the Wimp Factor, fraternity students plan date rapes after spending a few inspirational hours with *Physical Interrogation Techniques*, a CIA-authored torture manual. Charles Manson smiles from his prison cell while a nation mourns for Polly Klaas, a young girl stolen from her bedroom during a slumber party by a stranger, then murdered.

The drama surrounding O. J. Simpson's arraignment on charges of murdering his ex-wife and her friend has given him another starring role in predatory culture, this time an even more thrilling role in the public imagination's gleeful obsession with the glamour of a celebrity hero gone bad. Everybody loves a handsome and middle-aged football hero turned rent-a-car spokesperson who charges through airports like his old running back self and helps Americans find the car that they need in a hurry. O. J. helped us dream that maybe we could marry a beauty contestant one day. And haven't we all wished at one time that we could exchange our rent-a-car for the junker that's parked in our oil-stained garage? It's hard not to remain a fan, even if you believe it was his powerful hand that was responsible for the multiple stab wounds that ripped apart the flesh of his victims, including the gash in his ex-wife's neck that was so deep it exposed her spinal column.

The Menendez brothers are not football stars but they, too, can be stars of predatory culture because they're cute murderers who wear crew neck sweaters. Young women have even forgiven one of them for wearing a toupee because Eric and Lyle know how to display anguish and grief for the camera and you can feel sorry for them. In predatory

culture, you and your brother can empty dozens of shotgun shells into the bodies of your twitching and bleeding parents and then take a well-deserved break; you can even use your dead parents' money to buy yourself a Rolex watch and hire a personal tennis coach. You can even buy yourself a restaurant. In order to get a hung jury and not be convicted (at least the first time around) all that you have to do is convince at least half of the jury that you were savagely butt-jacked by your father. That shouldn't be too difficult because in predatory culture, such horrors are commonplace. If half the jury can project that they are your father, mother, girlfriend, or even boyfriend, then you've got it made. In predatory culture there are endless possibilities for clean-cut murderers.

The current culture of the United States makes it fun to be a simple, run-of-the-mill predatory killer and even more fun if you happen to co-construct your subjectivity as an over-achiever murderer. It's the most fun thing of all, of course, to be a serial killer. You might even inspire a movie about a housewife serial killer starring a famous Hollywood movie actress. In fact, you don't have to be very successful in normative terms to be a celebrity murderer. You don't have to be much more than just a plain human butcher who likes to regularly attend church, not let the water bill go unpaid and religiously consume human limbs and organs. You don't even have to cook the limbs at all let alone prepare them from a recipe found in a celebrity cookbook.

Jeffrey Dahmer T-shirts are big sellers at heavy metal concerts but it's safe to conclude he must have had some admirers who listen to classical music. But they would never be seen in a Dahmer T-shirt. In fact, you don't have to attend a musical concert of any kind to thrill at his exploits of dismembering seventeen delicious young men. There is a comic book available that you can enjoy privately although you will probably not want to let your friends know you have one. Adoring fans the now deceased showered Dahmer with over twelve thousand dollars.

Predatory culture makes it possible to be a Henry Lee Lucas or a Richard Ramirez and be adored. Ramirez, better known as California's "night stalker" who killed thirteen people, has a devoted following of women who write him regularly. But Dahmer is probably more popular because, after all, he was a cannibal. Seventy-five of the approximately

one hundred and sixty world-wide serial killers over the last twenty years were found in the United States (Toufexis, 1994). Baudrillard is right. America is the "*only remaining primitive society*" (1988, p. 7).

Handguns Are Fun, but Uzis Are Quicker

I keep telling my friends in other countries to visit me in Los Angeles. It's a fun place to be and you might be able to survive a "drive-by" or an attack by a disenchanted ex-employee with an MIG assault rifle out on a rampage, and live to tell people. That's another way to attract fun people in predatory culture who will want to be your friend.

In predatory culture we need not worry too much. Our politicians can console and reassure us by plugging us into the myth machine: television. The New Right has used the media effectively (and effectively) not simply to transform gangsters or actors into politicians through the services of high-tech image consultants, but even more impressively, to seduce U.S. citizens into cultural nostalgia and social amnesia as a way out of the postmodern ambience of retreat and despondency. Now that the cold war is over, many students feel a hunger for a new enemy. Already there exists a nostalgia for the Persian Gulf War as it was ideologically produced through CNN. At the same time the New Right has, through pernicious foreign and domestic policies, shaped by the heritage of imperialism, helped the United States flex its global muscles in Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and Iraq, setting the stage for a renewed patriotic zeal and construction of the postmodern national subject. Douglas Kellner notes that, under the control of multinational capital, the media have effectively served as ideological mouthpieces for government disinformation and have helped to forge a conservative ideological hegemony. 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

(1990:219).

Largely because of the way in which media functions to shape and merchandise morality and to construct certain forms of citizenship and individual and collective identities, our understanding of the meaning and importance of democracy has become impoverished in proportion to its dissolution and retreat from contemporary social life. In this time of democratic decline in the United States, ideals and images have become detached from stable and agreed-upon meanings and associations and are now beginning to assume a reality of their own. The 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. What is missing from the educational debate is a discussion of the way in which capitalism is able to achieve this cultural and ideological totalization and homogenization, and through it, the ability to insinuate itself into social practices and private perceptions (see Grossberg, 1988).

Capitalism can be fun for students, especially if you happen to live in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis City School District now has Weapon Watch in its 104,000-pupil district and already more than seventy students have been arrested. Students are given rewards of fifty dollars if they turn in fellow classmates who bring guns to school. What's fun about it is that a Weapon Watch representative arranges to meet secretly with and pay off informants. Anonymous tipsters are given code numbers to protect their identities. Already an eleven-year-old was caught with a sawed-off rifle and dozens of guns have been confiscated including a .9mm semi-automatic pistol, a .380 APC semi-automatic pistol and a .38-caliber revolver (Natali, 1994). Guns can be fun but its more fun to turn in those who bring them to school. At least that's what predatory culture teaches. And in the end the school doesn't have to invest in expensive metal detectors like so many other schools.

It's less fun to be in Wedowee, Alabama for high school students. That's because high school principal, Holond Humphries, threatened to cancel the school prom rather than allow "mixed" couples to attend. This didn't jive well with Revonda Bowem, a student who has a white father and black mother. Humphries reportedly said that his edict was designed

to prevent more "mistakes" like her from happening. Predictably, the Ku Klux Klan supported Humphries on the grounds that Humphries was supporting Biblical edicts (Harrison, 1994).

Today's increasingly "disorganized" capitalism has produced a gaudy sideshow that has managed to promote a counterfeit democracy of flags and emblems—one that has managed to harness the affective currency of popular culture such that the average American's investment in being "American" has reached an unparalleled high the likes of which has not been seen since the years of the McCarthy hearings. The question that needs to be asked is: How are the subjectivities (experiences) and identities of individuals and the production of media knowledges within popular culture mutually articulated?

What isn't being talked about in today's educational debate is the desperate need within our schools for creating a media literate citizenry that can disrupt, contest, and transform media apparatuses so that they no longer have the power to infantilize the population and continue to create passive, fearful, paranoid, and apolitical social subjects.

George Gerbner (1989/90) and others have pointed out that American television viewers are accepting a distorted picture of the real world "more readily than reality itself." Television reality is one in which men outnumber women three to one, where women are usually mothers or lovers, rarely work outside the home, and are natural victims of violence. It is a reality where less than ten per cent of the population hold blue collar jobs, where few elderly people exist, where young Blacks learn to accept their minority status as inevitable and are trained to anticipate their own victimization (they are usually portrayed as the white hero's comic sidekick or else drug addicts, gang members, and killers). It is a world in which eighteen acts of violence an hour occur in children's prime time programs. Violence in television demonstrates the social power of adult white males who are most likely to get involved with violence but also most likely to get away with it. It also serves as a mass spectacle reflecting the allocative power of the state. And this is occurring in a country that in 1990 reported the largest number of rapes against women in its history and a prison incarceration rate of Blacks that exceeds that of South Africa. A country where there are more gun stores than gas stations; where rich Angelenos are hiring private police; where the

wealthy neighborhoods display signs warning *Armed Response!* and where security systems and the militarization of urban life are refiguring social space along the lines of the postmodern film *Blade Runner*. The veins of Latin America opened by CIA mobsters and generations of foreign policy bureaucrats in starched shirts are bleeding northwards, pumping the Third World into the heart of Los Angeles. We are facing a crisis of predatory culture forged through the unholy symbiosis of capitalism and technology (technocapitalism), a crisis that has profoundly global implications. We have been warned by the cyberpunk generation, but our eyes and ears no longer belong to us.

Making Sense of the Senseless: Meaning and Postmodernity

How does one make sense where there is no sense? The debate surrounding postmodernity is in part a response to this question. The conversation surrounding postmodernity is not gathering momentum solely in literature, but also in social theory, cultural studies, education, and legal studies. A central thesis of postmodernism is that meaning is increasingly becoming severed from representation. Peter Burger puts it thus: "[I]n our society the sign no longer refers to a signified but always only to other signs, so that we no longer encounter anything like meaning without speech, but only move in an endless chain of signifiers" (1989:124). In other words, the unity of the sign and its ability to anchor meaning has been significantly weakened. The average individual lacks a language for making sense of everyday life. Burger writes that:

The modern culture industry robs individuals of "languages" for interpreting self and world by denying them the media for organizing their own experiences. The consciousness industry does represent a public sphere of production, but one that takes consciousness as "raw material" or that constantly tries to sever the connection between concrete experiences and consciousness (1984:xxviii-xxvix).

Lawrence Grossberg echoes this theme when he writes that:

Contemporary ideological structures seem incapable of making sense of certain affective experiences. ... But this does not mean that we do not continue to live

within and experience ourselves in terms of particular ideological meanings and values; simply that these are increasingly unrelated to our affective moods, that they cannot speak to them (1988b:180).

I do not wish to enter into an extended discussion of postmodernity here, except to note that there are both utopian and dystopian currents to the postmodern condition and post-structuralist theorizing. But what is important to recognize in this ongoing debate is that postmodernity has brought with it not only new forms of collective self-reflexivity but also new forms of ideological colonization. Critics as diverse as Andreas Hyssén, Todd Gitlin, and Fredric Jameson have pointed out that postmodernism has a specifically, though not exclusively, American strain. Cornel West (Stephanson, 1988:276) refers to this as "a form of Americanization of the globe." The rise of postmodernism has been materially tied to the rise of American capital on a global scale, dated to the late 1950s and early 1960s, an era of interimperialist rivalry and multinationalization. Jameson has argued that the persistence of *l'ancien regime* in Europe precluded the same kind of development there, but in the United States a whole new system of cultural production emerged and a new, specifically American cultural apparatus or "cultural dominant" began to serve as a form of ideological hegemony, forcing Third World countries into the untenable positions of playing "catch up" (Stephanson, 1988:8).

I do not conceive of postmodernity as a "total historical rupture" that constitutes the ideological representation of late capitalism, the commodification of our decentered subjectivities, the implosion of the difference between the image and the real, or the collapse of all meta-narrative, but rather as a sensibility or logic by which we appropriate in the contemporary context, cultural practices into our own lives. That is, I wish to call attention to postmodernity as a process significantly less totalizing, as "determining moments in culture and everyday life" (Grossberg 1988b:39). Postmodernity in this view refers to the "growing distance, and expanding series of ruptures or gaps, between these various aspects of everyday life, between the available meanings, values and objects of desire which socially organize our existence and identity, and the possibilities for investing in or caring

about them which are enabled by our moods and emotions" (39). Grossberg is referring here to a feeling or sensibility that life no longer has any fundamental purpose to which we can passionately commit. He remarks that our "mattering maps no longer correspond to any available maps of meaning"(40). Postmodernity is, in short, a crisis of meaning and feeling: "a dissolution of what we might call the 'anchoring affect' that articulates meaning and affect" (p. 40). One of the dangers of postmodern culture is the establishment of what Grossberg calls a "disciplined mobilization" by which he means "the construction of a frontier as an unbridgeable gap between the livable and the unlivable, the possible and impossible, the real and the unreal" (37). A disciplined mobilization refers to the temporal and spatial articulation of texts through social practices which give us both stability and mobility within everyday life. It "defines the very possibilities of where and how we move and stop, of where and how we place and displace ourselves, or where and how we are installed into cultural texts and extend beyond them (36-7). Such a "typography of cultural practices" defines the sites within culture we can occupy, the investments we can make in them, and the places along which we can connect and transform them. Grossberg is especially concerned here with the increasing ability of the New Right to develop ideological and affective alliances among social groups. That is, looking at the postmodern frontier as a site of struggle among discourse, material practices, and representation, it can be argued that the New Right has been able to rearticulate, reconstruct, and reterritorialize the "national popular" (the family, nationalism, consumerism, youth, pleasure, heroes, etc.) against itself as affectively charged but ideologically empty. One example of this is the ability of New Class neo-conservatives to manipulate traditional populism (Picone 1987-88:21).

Youth and Postmodern Apathy: Critical Pedagogy, Boredom and Terror

Even in this postmodern era, the ideological hegemony in the United States, while irredeemably condemnable and undeniably powerful, is not without its contradictory moments. Students often see the critical educator's concern for community and social justice as a threat to their

general ideological commitments. Critical pedagogy becomes, for many students, an uncomfortable and self-contesting exercise. They are reluctant or refuse to question meanings, preferring instead to live them.

It is not the purpose of critical pedagogy to absorb student apathy about politics and social change into traditional political categories and end up by offering yet another "blaming the victim" analysis of the ideological formation of today's youth. Rather, I want to acknowledge that there are historical conditions which account for youth resistance and apathy. For instance, Grossberg notes that "youth inserts cultural texts into its public and private lives in complex ways and we need to be aware of the complexity and contradictory nature of youth's social and political positions" (1988a:139). Grossberg rightly recognizes that in our postmodern era, young people exist within the space between subjectification (boredom) and commodification (terror). Our media culture has become a "buffer zone," a "paradoxical site" at which the youth of today live out a difficult if not impossible relation to the future. In fact, Grossberg argues that American youth have largely been formed out of the media strategies of the "autonomous affect" in which politics, values, and meaning have been reduced to individualized images of morality, self-sacrifice, and community. They are living the surface identities of media images in which the politics of interpretive insight is replaced by the politics of "feeling good."

Grossberg points to one cultural struggle in which the New Right has taken the lead: the attack on the counterculture of the sixties and seventies, in part thought its ability to reconstruct the history of the war in Vietnam. A brief treatment of such a reconstruction will help to illustrate his point.

Vietnam was a war fought by youth and became "the symbol of the moment when the identification of the postwar youth generations with America fell apart and consequently, the moment when America lost, not only its center but its faith in a center" (Grossberg, 1988b:56). Yet popular narratives in the media now attempt "to place the war back into the familiar frameworks of traditional war narratives of personal drama" (57). The existence of the counter-culture at that time is generally ignored in popular representations of the war. Rather, the war is interpreted as an attack on America and its sacred values—"the moment

when the postwar youth generations lost their faith, not only in America, but in the possibility of ever finding a center, an identity, in which it could invest" (58). The effect of ignoring the counter-culture is to displace "the ideological content from youth culture and [transform] it into purely affective relations" (59)—or "affective nostalgia." That there exist few grounds presently available to students upon which to imagine constructing an oppositional or counter-hegemonic pedagogical stance in a cultural center with no real ideological content—only feelings—makes the challenge of critical pedagogy all the more acute and all the more pressing.

Aside from youth's subjective formation though the "affective alliances" of mass media, part of the problem with the refusal of youth to engage in issues of class oppression and social injustice both inside and outside the classroom has to do with the fact that in the United States, domination and oppression are not as overt as in many Third World countries. North American civil society is less simply structured by divisions based on the conflict of labor and capital. Consequently, class relations do not appear to cause social inequality and consequently there is a greater focus on oppressive instances of gender divisions, age differences, and ethnic conflict. In other words, we do not live within structures of terror such as those found, for instance, in El Salvador or Guatemala, where workers are frequently dispatched by a *coup de grace* through the forehead. Furthermore, collective action does not seem as necessary within a climate of political and cultural pluralism, although the presence of the black underclass and the homeless is somewhat changing this spectatorial detachment towards human oppression. The point is that class, gender, and racial oppression do exist, regardless of the perception by the public at large (Baum, 1987).

Grossberg admits that given the New Right's incursion into the frontier between affect and ideology, where only or mainly emotional responses are possible without the benefit of ideological understanding or commitment, there is little room for Gramsci's "optimism of the will" so necessary for political struggle, for understanding and confronting affective commitment outside of the system of cultural power within which such an investment is constructed, and for assuming a necessary relationship between affective investment and external systems of

meaning. For instance, the desire among conservatives and die-hard "patriots" to make flag burning a crime (whether by constitutional amendment or civil blasphemy statute) as a reaction against the recent United States Supreme Court ruling, is an excellent example of affective commitment in which patriotism is construed, in Grossberg's terms, as an "empty center" devoid of the kind of ideological engagement that makes it impossible to undermine any definition of what American means other than absolute commitment to America itself.

In relation to what is happening on the popular front, critical pedagogy must become a strategic and empowering response to those historical conditions which have produced us as subjects, and to the ways we are inserted on a daily basis into the frontier of popular culture and existing structures of power. It is our claim that a clarification of some of the practices of critical pedagogy can, as a form of intellectual labor, have transformative effects, enabling us to deconstruct and move beyond affective investments "to a higher level of abstraction in order to transform the empirically taken-for-granted into the concretely determined" (Grossberg, 1988b:68).

Critical Pedagogy and the Analysis of the Predatory Culture

Dare we create a critical pedagogy that is able to provide conditions for students to reject what they experience as a given; a pedagogy that includes a sharpened focus on the relationship among economies of capital investment, political economies, moral economies, economies of "free" expression, sexual economies, economies of belief and identity formation and the construction of desire and formation of human will; a pedagogy of discontent and of outrage that is able to contest the hegemony of prevailing definitions of the everyday as the "way things are"; a pedagogy that refuses the hidebound distinction between lofty expression and popular culture, between art and experience, between reason and the imagination? We need a critical pedagogy in our colleges of education that can problematize schooling as a site for the construction of moral, cultural, and national identity, and emphasize the creation of the schooled citizen as a form of emplacement, as a geopolitical construction, as a process in the formation of the geography of cultural desire. Dare

we transform teaching practices in our schools into acts of dissonance and interventions into the ritual inscription of our students into the codes of the dominant culture; into structured refusals to naturalize existing relations of power; into the creation of subaltern counterpublics?

It only makes sense that a curriculum should have as its focus of investigation the study of everyday, informal, popular and predatory culture and how the historical patterns of power that inform such cultures are implicated in the formation of individual subjectivity and identity. Pedagogy occurs not only in schools but in all cultural sites. The electronic media is perhaps the greatest site of pedagogical production that exists—you could say it is a form of perpetual pedagogy. In addition to understanding literacies applicable to print culture, students need to recognize how their identities are formed and their "mattering maps" produced through an engagement with electronic and other types of media so that they will be able to engage in alternative ways of symbolizing the self and gain a significant purchase on the construction of their own identities and the direction of their desiring. It is in such an investigation that teachers and students become transformed into cultural workers for self and social emancipation. I am calling for a pedagogy of critical media literacy that is linked to what Paul Willis (1990) has referred to as a "grounded aesthetics" designed to provide students with the symbolic resources for creative self- and social formation in order that they can more critically re-enter the vast, uncharted spaces of common culture.

I am further suggesting that students need to make critical judgments about what predatory culture might mean, and what is possible or desirable outside existing configurations of power and privilege. Students need to be able to cross over into different zones of cultural diversity and form what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1988) calls hybrid and hyphenated identities in order to rethink the relationship of self to society, of self to other, and to deepen the moral vision of the social order. This raises an important question: How are the categories of race, class, gender, and sexual preference shaped within the margins and centers of society, and how can students engage history as a way of reclaiming power and identity? The critical media literacy of which I speak is structured around the notion of a politics of location and identity as border-crossing—or pedagogy of

difference. It is grounded in the ethical imperative of examining the contradictions in U.S. society between the meaning of freedom, the demands of social justice, and the obligations of citizenship on the one hand, and the structured silence that permeates incidents of suffering in everyday life.

The politics of difference that undergirds such a critical pedagogy is one in which differences rearticulate and shape identity such that students can actively refuse the role of cultural servant and sentinel for the status quo in order to reclaim, reshape, and transform their own historical destiny. The pedagogy is not premised upon a common culture, or a transcendence of local knowledges or particularisms. It is not, in other words, committed to Enlightenment epistemology nor economic liberalism but rather a new socialist imaginary grounded not in specific forms of rationality but in forms of detotalized agency and the expansion of the sphere of radical democracy to new forms of social life. It is a move away from what Arnold Krupat calls "unself-critical humanistic universalism" and toward a "critical cosmopolitanism" (1991:243) which doesn't ask people to discard the ethnic and local attachments for more global commitments but rather interrogates *the universal already contained in the local* and examines how the ethnic and the regional *is already populated by other perspectives and meanings*. We make our homes, we become "homeys" in this zone of contest between local and global, dominant and subordinated meanings and social practices, seeking to rearticulate them in the interests of greater social justice and freedom. This is no small task at this moment in human history in which subjectivity is being constructed within the future anterior; where we feel nostalgia for a time that has not yet arrived; where we long for new forms of longing and of belonging; where spaces of possibility are expanding but our belief in possibility can imagine its own extinction and consequently a new history can be born. How we shall decide to write history is another matter, but one that we need not leave entirely to chance.

Our pedagogical homes, our "hoods" need to become cultural spaces where students are able to form interlaced networks of intracommunal negotiation, spaces that work toward the construction of intimacies and coarticulated communal patterns in classrooms and the surrounding

communities and that take the project of human liberation and social justice seriously.

Notes

1. The term "predatory culture" was inspired by reading Mick Farren's "Theater of the Disturbed" in the *Los Angeles Reader* (December 3, 1993, Vol 16, No. 8, pp. 8–11).
2. This essay has drawn from two previously published essays: Peter McLaren "Education as a political issue: What's missing in the public conversation about education?" In *Thirteen questions: Reframing Education's conversation*. Edited by Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg (249–262). Peter Lang, 1992; also from Peter McLaren and Rhonda Hammer, "Critical pedagogy and the postmodern challenge: Toward a critical postmodernist pedagogy of liberation." *Educational Foundations* (1989, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 29–620).

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