Slacking Off: Border Youth and Postmodern Education

HENRY A. GIROUX

The task is to get to grips with the "passage to postmodernity," which has opened up since the late 1960s and the end of the post-war boom in the global capitalist economy, to achieve an understanding of the emerging new culture of time and space, and related transformations in forms of knowledge and experience in the (post)-modern world.

For many theorists occupying various positions on the political spectrum, the current historical moment signals less a need to come to grips with the new forms of knowledge, experiences, and conditions that constitute postmodernism than the necessity to write its obituary. The signs of exhaustion are in part measured by the fact that postmodernism has gripped two generations of intellectuals who have pondered endlessly over its meaning and implications as a "social condition and cultural movement" (Jencks 10). The "postmodern debate" has spurned little consensus and a great deal of confusion and animosity. The themes are, by now, well known: master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of canonicity and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a "war on totality" and a disavowal of all-encompassing, single, world-views; rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by the insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk art forms are proper objects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom have incurred a deep-rooted skepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralized and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history is spurned as a unilinear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realization of freedom.¹

While these and other issues have become central to the postmodern debate, they are connected through the challenges and provocations they provide to modernity's conception of history, agency, representation, culture, and the responsibility of intellectuals. The postmodern challenge constitutes not only a diverse body of cultural criticism, it must also be seen
as a contextual discourse that has challenged specific disciplinary boundaries in such fields as literary studies, geography, education, architecture, feminism, performance art, anthropology, sociology, and many other areas. Given its broad theoretical reach, its political anarchism, and its challenge to "legislating" intellectuals, it is not surprising that there has been a growing movement on the part of diverse critics to distance themselves from postmodernism.

While postmodernism may have been elevated to the height of fashion hype in both academic journals and the popular press in North America during the last twenty years, it is clear that a more sinister and reactionary mood has emerged which constitutes something of a backlash. Of course, postmodernism did become something of a fashion trend, but such events are short lived and rarely take any subject seriously. But the power of fashion and commodification should not be underestimated in terms of how such practices bestow on an issue a cloudy residue of irrelevance and misunderstanding. There is more at stake in the recent debates on postmodernism than the effects of fashion and commodification; in fact, the often essentialized terms in which critiques of postmodernism have been framed suggest something more onerous. In the excessive rhetorical flourishes that dismiss postmodernism as reactionary nihilism, fad, or simply a new form of consumerism, there appears a deep-seated anti-intellectualism, one that lends credence to the notion that theory is an academic luxury and has little to do with concrete political practice. Anti-intellectualism aside, the postmodern backlash also points to a crisis in the way in which the project of modernity attempts to appropriate, prescribe, and accommodate issues of difference and indeterminacy.

Much of the criticism that now so blithely dismisses postmodernism appears trapped in what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as modernist "utopias that served as beacons for the long march to the rule of reason [which] visualized a world without margins, leftovers, the unaccounted for—without dissidents and rebels" (xi). Against the indeterminacy, fragmentation, and skepticism of the postmodern era, the master narratives of modernism, particularly Marxism and liberalism, have been undermined as oppositional discourses. One consequence is that "a whole generation of postwar intellectuals have experienced an identity crisis. . . . What results is a mood of mourning and melancholia" (Mercer 424).

The legacy of essentialism and orthodoxy seems to be reasserting itself on the part of left intellectuals who reject postmodernism as a style of cultural criticism and knowledge production. It can also be seen in the refusal on the part of intellectuals to acknowledge the wide-ranging processes of social and cultural transformation taken up in postmodern discourses that are appropriate to grasping the contemporary experiences of youth and the wide-ranging proliferation of forms of diversity within an age of declining authority, economic uncertainty, the proliferation of electronic mediated technol-
ologies, and the extension of what I call consumer pedagogy into almost every aspect of youth culture.

In what follows, I want to shift the terms of the debate in which postmodernism is usually engaged, especially by its more recent critics. In doing so, I want to argue that postmodernism as a site of "conflicting forces and divergent tendencies" (Patton 89) becomes useful pedagogically when it provides elements of an oppositional discourse for understanding and responding to the changing cultural and educational shift affecting youth in North America. A resistant or political postmodernism seems invaluable to me in helping educators and others address the changing conditions of knowledge production in the context of emerging mass electronic media and the role these new technologies are playing as critical socializing agencies in redefining both the locations and the meaning of pedagogy.

My concern with expanding the way in which educators and other cultural workers understand the political reach and power of pedagogy as it positions youth within a postmodern culture suggests that postmodernism is to be neither romanticized nor casually dismissed. On the contrary, I believe that it is a fundamentally important discourse that needs to be mined critically in order to help educators to understand the modernist nature of public schooling in North America. It is also useful for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within electronically mediated cultures and how they are producing a new generation of youths who exist between the borders of a modernist world of certainty and order, informed by the culture of the West and its technology of print, and a postmodern world of hybridized identities, electronic technologies, local cultural practices, and pluralized public spaces. But before I develop the critical relationship between postmodern discourse and the promise of pedagogy and its relationship to border youth, I want to comment further on the recent backlash against postmodernism and why I believe it reproduces rather than constructively addresses some of the pedagogical and political problems affecting contemporary schools and youth.

Welcome to the Postmodern Backlash

While conservatives such a Daniel Bell and his cohorts may see in postmodernism the worst expression of the radical legacy of the 1960s, an increasing number of radical critics view postmodernism as the cause of a wide range of theoretical excesses and political injustices. For example, recent criticism from British cultural critic John Clarke argues that the hyper-reality of postmodernism wrongly celebrates and depoliticizes the new informational technologies and encourages metropolitan intellectuals to proclaim the end of everything in order to commit themselves to nothing (especially the materialist problems of the masses). Dean MacCannell goes further and argues that "postmodern writing [is] an expression of soft fascism" (187). Feminist theorist Susan Bordo dismisses postmodernism as
just another form of "stylish nihilism" and castigates its supporters for constructing a "world in which language swallows up everything" (291). The backlash has become so prevalent in North America that the status of popular criticism and reporting seems to necessitate proclaiming that postmodernism is "dead." Hence, comments in forums ranging from the editorial pages of the New York Times to popular texts such as 13thGen to popular academic magazines such as the Chronicle of Higher Education alert the general public in no uncertain terms that it is no longer fashionable to utter the "p" word.

Of course, more serious critiques have appeared from the likes of Jurgen Habermas, Perry Anderson, David Harvey, and Terry Eagleton, but the current backlash has a different intellectual quality to it, a kind of reductionism that is both disturbing and irresponsible in its refusal to engage postmodernism in any kind of dialogical, theoretical debate. Many of these left critics often assume the moral high ground and muster their theoretical machinery within binary divisions that create postmodern fictions, on the one side, and politically correct, materialist freedom fighters on the other. One consequence is that any attempt to engage the value and importance of postmodern discourses critically is sacrificed to the cold winter winds of orthodoxy and intellectual parochialism. I am not suggesting that all critics of postmodernism fall prey to such a position, nor am I suggesting that concerns about the relationship between modernity and postmodernity, the status of ethics, the crisis of representation and subjectivity, or the political relevance of postmodern discourses should not be problematized. But viewing postmodernism as a terrain to be contested suggests theoretical caution rather than reckless abandonment or casual dismissal.

What is often missing from these contentious critiques is the recognition that since postmodernism does not operate under any absolute sign, it might be more productive to reject any arguments that position postmodernism within an essentialized politics, an either/or set of strategies. A more productive encounter would attempt, instead, to understand how postmodernism's more central insights illuminate how power is produced and circulated through cultural practices that mobilize multiple relations of subordination. Rather than proclaiming the end of reason, postmodernism can be critically analyzed for how successfully it interrogates the limits of the project of modernist rationality and its universal claims to progress, happiness, and freedom. Instead of assuming that postmodernism has vacated the terrain of values, it seems more useful to address how it accounts for how values are constructed historically and relationally, and how they might be addressed as the basis or "precondition of a politically engaged critique" (Butler 6-7). In a similar fashion, instead of claiming that postmodernism's critique of the essentialist subject denies a theory of subjectivity, it seems more productive to examine how its claims about the contingent character of identity, constructed in a multiplicity of social relations and discourses,
redefines the notion of agency. One example of this type of inquiry comes from Judith Butler, who argues that acknowledging that “the subject is constituted is not [the same as claiming] that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency” (“Contingent Foundations” 13). The now familiar argument that postmodernism substitutes representations for reality indicates less an insight than a reductionism that refuses to engage critically how postmodern theories of representation work to give meaning to reality.

A postmodern politics of representation might be better served through an attempt to understand how power is mobilized in cultural terms, how images are used on a national and local scale to create a representational politics that is reorienting traditional notions of space and time. A postmodern discourse could also be evaluated through the pedagogical consequences of its call to expand the meaning of literacy by broadening “the range of texts we read, and . . . the ways in which we read them” (Bérubé 75). The fact of the matter is that the mass media plays a decisive role in the lives of young people, and the issue is not whether such media perpetuate dominant power relations but how youth and others experience the culture of the media differently (Tomlinson 40). Postmodernism pluralizes the meaning of culture, while modernism firmly situates it theoretically in apparatuses of power. It is precisely in this dialectical interplay between difference and power that postmodernism and modernism inform each other rather than cancel each other out. The dialectical nature of the relationship that postmodernism has to modernism warrants a theoretical moratorium on critiques that affirm or negate postmodernism on the basis of whether it represents a break from modernism. The value of postmodernism lies elsewhere.

Acknowledging both the reactionary and progressive moments in postmodernism, anti-essentialist cultural work might take up the challenge of “writing the political back into the postmodern,” while simultaneously radicalizing the political legacy of modernism in order to promote a new vision of radical democracy in a postmodern world (Ebert 291). One challenge in the debate over postmodernism is whether its more progressive elements can further our understanding of how power works, how social identities are formed, and how the changing conditions of the global economy and the new informational technologies can be articulated to meet the challenges posed by progressive cultural workers and the new social movements. More specifically, the issue for critical educators lies in appropriating postmodernism as part of a broader pedagogical project which reasserts the primacy of the political while simultaneously engaging the most progressive aspects of modernism. Postmodernism becomes relevant to the extent that it becomes part of a broader political project in which the relationship between modernism and postmodernism becomes dialectical, dialogic, and critical.
In what follows, I want to illuminate and then analyze some of the tensions between schools as modernist institutions and the fractured conditions a postmodern culture of youth along with the problems they pose for critical educators. First, there is the challenge of understanding the modernist nature of existing schooling and its refusal to relinquish a view of knowledge, culture, and order that undermines the possibility for constructing a radical democratic project in which a shared conception of citizenship simultaneously challenges growing regimes of oppression and struggles for the conditions needed to construct a multiracial and multicultural democracy. Second, there is a need for cultural workers to address the emergence of a new generation of youth who are increasingly constructed within postmodern economic and cultural conditions that are almost entirely ignored by the schools. Third, there is the challenge to critically appropriate those elements of a postmodern pedagogy that might be useful in educating youth to be the subjects of history in a world that is increasingly diminishing the possibilities for radical democracy and global peace.

Modernist Schools and Postmodern Conditions

A clip from [the film] War Games: David Lightman (Matthew Broderick) see a brochure of a computer company promising a quantum leap in game technology coming this Christmas . . . breaks into a system and, thinking it's the game company computer, asks to play global thermonuclear war . . . Sees on TV that for three minutes Strategic Air Command went on full alert thinking there had been a Soviet sneak attack . . . is arrested and interrogated . . . breaks back into the system and asks the computer, "Is this a game or is it real?" The computer answers: "What's the difference?"

Walter Parkes

Wedded to the language of order, certainty, and mastery, public schools are facing a veritable sea change in the demographic, social, and cultural composition of the United States for which they are radically unprepared. As thoroughly modernist institutions, public schools have long relied upon moral, political, and social technologies that legitimate an abiding faith in the Cartesian tradition of rationality, progress, and history. The consequences are well known. Knowledge and authority in the school curricula are organized not to eliminate differences but to regulate them through cultural and social divisions of labor. Class, racial, and gender differences are either ignored in school curricula or subordinated to the imperatives of a history and culture that is linear and uniform.

Within the discourse of modernism, knowledge draws its boundaries almost exclusively from a European model of culture and civilization and connects learning to the mastery of autonomous and specialized bodies of knowledge. Informed by modernist traditions, schooling becomes an agent of those political and intellectual technologies associated with what Ian Hunter terms the "governmentalizing" of the social order. The result is a
pedagogical apparatus regulated by a practice of ordering that views "contingency as an enemy and order as a task" (Bauman xi). The practice of ordering, licensing, and regulating that structures public schooling is predicated on a fear of difference and indeterminacy. The effects reach deep into the structure of public schooling and include: an epistemic arrogance and faith in certainty sanctions pedagogical practices and public spheres in which cultural differences are viewed as threatening; knowledge becomes positioned in the curricula as an object of mastery and control; the individual student is privileged as a unique source of agency irrespective of iniquitous relations of power; the technology and culture of the book is treated as the embodiment of modernist high learning and the only legitimate object of pedagogy.

While the logic of public schooling may be utterly modernist, it is neither monolithic nor homogeneous. But at the same time, the dominant features of public schooling are characterized by a modernist project that has increasingly come to rely upon instrumental reason and the standardization of curricula. In part, this can be seen in the regulation of class, racial, and gender differences through rigid forms of testing, sorting, and tracking. The rule of reason reveals its Western cultural legacy in highly centered curricula that more often than not privilege the histories, experiences, and cultural capital of largely white, middle class students. Moreover, the modernist nature of public schooling is evident in the refusal of educators to incorporate popular culture into the curricula or to take account of the new electronically mediated, informational systems in the postmodern age that are generating massively new socializing contexts for contemporary youth.

The emerging conditions of indeterminacy and hybridity that the public schools face but continue to ignore can be seen in a number of elements that characterize what I loosely call postmodern culture. First, the United States is experiencing a new wave of immigration which, by the end of this century, may exceed in volume and importance the last wave at the turn of the twentieth century. Key geographic areas within the country—chiefly the large metropolitan regions of the Northeast and Southwest, including California—and major public institutions (especially those of social welfare and education) are grappling with entirely new populations that bring with them new needs. In 1940, seventy percent of immigrants came from Europe, but in 1992 only fifteen percent came from Europe while 44 percent came from Latin America and 37 percent came from Asia. National identity can no longer be seen through the lens of cultural uniformity or enforced through the discourse of assimilation. A new postmodern culture has emerged marked by specificity, difference, plurality, and multiple narratives.

Second, the sense of possibility that has informed the American Dream of material well-being and social mobility is no longer matched by an economy that can sustain such dreams. In the last two decades, the American economy has entered a prolonged era of stagnation, punctuated by short-
term growth spurts. In the midst of an ongoing recession and declining real incomes for low- and middle-income groups, the prospects for economic growth over the next period of US history appear extremely limited. The result has been the expansion of service economy jobs and an increase in the number of companies that are downsizing and cutting labor costs in order to meet global competition. Not only are full-time jobs drying up, but there has also been a surge in the “number of Americans—perhaps as many as 37 million—who are employed in something other than full-time permanent positions” (Jost 633). These so-called “contingent workers” are “paid less than full-time workers and often get no health benefits, no pensions and no paid holidays, sick days or vacations” (Just 628). Massive unemployment and diminishing expectations have become a way of life for youth all over North America. *MacLean’s Magazine* reports that in Canada, “People ages 15 to 24 are currently facing unemployment rates of more than 20 percent, well above the national average of 10.8 percent” (Blythe 35). For most contemporary youth, the promise of economic and social mobility no longer warrants the legitimating claims it held for earlier generations of young people. The signs of despair among this generation are everywhere. Surveys strongly suggest that contemporary youth from diverse classes, races, ethnicities, and cultures “believe it will be much harder for them to get ahead than it was for their parents—and are overwhelmingly pessimistic about the long-term fate of their generation and nation” (Howe and Strauss 16).

Clinging to the modernist script that technological growth necessitates progress, educators refuse to give up the long-held assumption that school credentials provide the best route to economic security and class mobility. While such a truth may have been relevant to the industrializing era, it is no longer sustainable within the post-Fordist economy of the West. New economic conditions call into question the efficacy of mass schooling in providing the “well-trained” labor force that employers required in the past. In light of these shifts, it seems imperative that educators and other cultural workers reexamine the mission of the schools. Rather than accepting modernist assumption that schools should train students for specific labor tasks, it makes more sense in the present historical moment to educate students to theorize differently about the meaning of work in a postmodern world. Indeterminacy rather than order should become the guiding principle of a pedagogy in which multiple views, possibilities, and differences are opened up as part of an attempt to read the future contingently rather than from the perspective of a master narrative that assumes rather than problematizes specific notions of work, progress, and agency. Under such circumstances, schools need to redefine curricula within a postmodern conception of culture linked to the diverse and changing global conditions that necessitate new forms of literacy, a vastly expanded understanding of how power works within cultural apparatuses, and a keener sense of how the existing generation of youth is being produced within a society in which mass
media plays a decisive if not unparalleled role in constructing multiple and diverse social identities.

As Stanley Aronowitz and I point out elsewhere:

Few efforts are being made to rethink the entire curriculum in the light of the new migration and immigration, much less develop entirely different pedagogies. In secondary schools and community colleges for example, students still study "subjects"—social studies, math, science, English and "foreign" languages. Some schools have "added" courses in the history and culture of Asian, Latin American and Caribbean societies, but have little thought of transforming the entire humanities and social studies curricula in the light of the cultural transformations of the school. Nor are serious efforts being made to integrate the sciences with social studies and the humanities; hence, science and math are still being deployed as sorting devices in most schools rather than seen as crucial markers of a genuinely innovative approach to learning. (Siege 6)

As modernist institutions, public schools have been unable to open up the possibility of thinking through the indeterminate character of the economy, knowledge, culture, and identity. Hence, it has become difficult, if not impossible, for such institutions to understand how social identities are fashioned and struggled over within political and technological conditions that have produced a crisis in the ways in which culture is organized in the West.

**Border Youth and Postmodern Culture**

The programmed instability and transitoriness characteristically widespread among a generation of eighteen to twenty-five year old border youth is inextricably rooted in a larger set of postmodern cultural conditions informed by the following assumptions: a general loss of faith in the modernist narratives of work and emancipation; the recognition that the indeterminacy of the future warrants confronting and living in the immediacy of experience; an acknowledgment that homelessness as a condition of randomness has replaced the security, if not misrepresentation, of home as a source of comfort and security; an experience of time and space as compressed and fragmented within a world of images that increasingly undermine the dialectic of authenticity and universalism. For border youth, plurality and contingency—whether mediated through the media or through the dislocations spurned by the economic system, the rise of new social movements, or the crisis of representation—have resulted in a world with few secure psychological, economic, or intellectual markers. This is a world in which one is condemned to wander across, within, and between multiple borders and spaces marked by excess, otherness, difference, and a dislocating notion of meaning and attention. The modernist world of certainty and order has given way to a planet in which hip hop and rap condenses time and space into what Paul Virilio calls "speed space." No longer belonging to any one place or location, youth increasingly inhabit shifting cultural and social spheres marked by a plurality of languages and cultures.
Communities have been refigured as space and time mutate into multiple and overlapping cyberspace networks. Youth talk to each other over electronic bulletin boards in coffee houses in North Beach, California. Cafes and other public salons, once the refuge of beatniks, hippies, and other cultural radicals have given way to members of the hacker culture. They reorder their imaginations through connections to virtual reality technologies, and lose themselves in images that wage a war on traditional meaning by reducing all forms of understanding to random access spectacles.

This is not meant to endorse a Frankfurt School dismissal of mass or popular culture in the postmodern age. On the contrary, I believe that the new electronic technologies with their proliferation of multiple stories and open-ended forms of interaction have altered not only the context for the production of subjectivities, but also how people "take in information and entertainment" (Parkes 54). Values no longer emerge from the modernist pedagogy of foundationalism and universal truths, or from traditional narratives based on fixed identities with their requisite structure of closure. For many youths, meaning is en route, the media has become a substitute for experience, and what constitutes understanding is grounded in a decentered and diasporic world of difference, displacement, and exchanges.

I want to take up the concept of border youth through a general analysis of some recent films that have attempted to portray the plight of young people within the conditions of a postmodern culture. I will focus on three films: River's Edge (1986), My Own Private Idaho (1991), and Slackers (1991). All of these films point not only to some of the economic and social conditions at work in the formation of youth, but they often do so within a narrative that combines a politics of despair with a fairly sophisticated depiction of the sensibilities and moods of a generation of youth. The challenge for critical educators is to question how a critical pedagogy might be employed to cancel out the worst dimensions of postmodern cultural criticism while appropriating some of its more radical aspects. At the same time, there is the issue of how a politics and project of pedagogy can be constructed to create the conditions for social agency and institutionalized change among postmodern youth.

For many postmodern youth, showing up for adulthood at the fin de siècle means pulling back on hope and trying to put off the future rather than taking up the modernist challenge of trying to shape it. Postmodern cultural criticism has captured much of the ennui among youth and has made clear that "What used to be the pessimism of a radical fringe is now the shared assumption of a generation" (Anshaw 27). Postmodern cultural criticism has helped to alert educators and others to the fault lines marking a generation, regardless of race or class, that seems neither motivated by nostalgia for some lost conservative vision of America nor at home in the New World Order paved with the promises of the expanding electronic information highway. For most commentators, youth have become "strange," "alien," and discon-
nected from the real world. For instance, in Gus Van Sant's film, *My Own Private Idaho*, the main character Mike, who hustles his sexual wares for money, is a dreamer lost in fractured memories of a mother who deserted him as a child. Caught between flashbacks of Mom shown in 8mm color, and the video world of motley street hustlers and their clients, Mike moves through his existence by falling asleep in times of stress only to awake in different geographic and spatial locations. What holds Mike's psychic and geographic travels together is the metaphor of sleep, the dream of escape, and the ultimate realization that even memories cannot fuel hope for the future. Mike becomes a metaphor for an entire generation forced to sell themselves in a world with no hope, a generation that aspires to nothing, works at degrading McJobs, and live in a world in which chance and randomness rather than struggle, community, and solidarity drive their fate.

A more disturbing picture of youth can be found in *River's Edge*. Teenage anomie and drugged apathy are given painful expression in the depiction of a group of working class youth who are casually told by John, one of their friends, that he has strangled his girlfriend, another of the group's members, and left her nude body on the riverbank. The group members at different times visit the site to view and probe the dead body of the girl. Seemingly unable to grasp the significance of the event, the youths initially hold off in informing anyone of the murder and with different degrees of concern initially try to protect John, the teenage sociopath, from being caught by the police. The youths in *River's Edge* drift through a world of broken families, blaring rock music, schooling marked by dead time, and a general indifference to life in general. Decentered and fragmented, they view death like life itself as merely a spectacle, a matter of style rather than substance. In one sense, these youths share the quality of being "asleep" that is depicted in *My Own Private Idaho*. But what is more disturbing in *River's Edge* is that lost innocence gives way not merely to teenage myopia, but to a culture in which human life is experienced as a voyeuristic seduction, a video game, good for passing time and diverting oneself from the pain of the moment. Despair and indifference cancel out the language of ethical discriminations and social responsibility while elevating the immediacy of pleasure to the defining moment of agency. In *River's Edge*, history as social memory is reassembled through vignettes of 1960s types portrayed as either burned out bikers or as the ex-radical turned teacher whose moralizing relegates politics to simply cheap opportunism. Exchanges among the young people in *River's Edge* appear like projections of a generation waiting either to fall asleep or to commit suicide. After talking about how he murdered his girlfriend, John blurts out, "You do shit, it's done, and then you die." Pleasure, violence, and death, in this case, reassert how a generation of youth takes seriously the dictum that life imitates art or how life is shaped within a violent culture of images in which, as another character states, "It might be easier being dead." To which her boyfriend, a Wayne's world type, replies, "Bullshit you couldn't
get stoned anymore." *River's Edge* and *My Own Private Idaho* reveal the seamy and dark side of a youth culture while employing the Hollywood mixture of fascination and horror to titillate the audiences drawn to these films. Employing the postmodern aesthetic of revulsion, locality, randomness, and senselessness, youths in these films appear to be constructed outside of a broader cultural and economic landscape. Instead, they become visible only through visceral expressions of psychotic behavior or the brooding experience of a self-imposed comatose alienation.

One of the more celebrated youth films of the 1990s is Richard Linklater's *Slacker*. A decidedly low-budget film, *Slacker* attempts in both form and content to capture the sentiments of a twenty-something generation of white youth who reject most of the values of the Reagan/Bush era but have a difficult time imagining what an alternative might look like. Distinctly nonlinear in its format, *Slacker* takes place in a twenty-four hour time frame in the college town of Austin, Texas. Borrowing its anti-narrative structure from films such as Luis Bunuel's *Phantom of Liberty* and Max Ophuls' *La Ronde*, *Slacker* is loosely organized around brief episodes in the lives of a variety of characters, none of whom are connected to each other except that each provides the pretext to lead the audience to the next character in the film. Sweeping through bookstores, coffee shops, auto-parts yards, bedrooms, and nightclubs, *Slacker* focuses on a disparate group of young people who possess little hope for the future and drift from job to job speaking a hybrid argot of bohemian intensities and new-age, pop-cult babble. The film portrays a host of young people who randomly move from one place to the next, border crossers with no sense of where they have come from or where they are going. In this world of multiple realities, "schizophrenia emerges as the psychic norm of late capitalism" (Hebdige 88). Characters work in bands with names like "Ultimate Loser," talk about being forcibly put in hospitals by their parents, and one neo-punker attempts to sell a Madonna pap smear to two acquaintances she meets in the street: "Check it out, I know it's kind of disgusting, but it's like sort of getting down to the real Madonna." This is a world in which language is wedded to an odd mix of nostalgia, popcorn philosophy, and MTV babble. Talk is organized around comments like: "I don't know. I've traveled, and when you get back you can't tell whether it really happened to you or if you just saw it on TV." Alienation is driven inward and emerges in comments like, "I feel stuck." Irony slightly overshadows a refusal to imagine any kind of collective struggle. Reality seems too despairing to care about. This is humorously captured in one instance by a young man who suggests, "You know how the slogan goes, 'Workers of the world, unite'? We say workers of the world, relax." People talk but appear disconnected from themselves and each other; lives traverse each other with no sense of community or connection. There is a pronounced sense in *Slacker* of youth caught in the throes of new information technologies that both contain their aspirations while at the same time holding out the promise of
some sense of agency. At rare moments in the film, the political paralysis of solipsistic refusal is offset by instances in which some characters recognize the importance of the image as a vehicle for cultural production, as a representational apparatus that cannot only make certain experiences available but can also be used to produce alternative realities and social practices. The power of the image is present in the way the camera follows characters throughout the film, at once stalking them and confining them to a gaze that is both constraining and incidental. In one scene, a young man appears in a video apartment surrounded by televisions that he claims he has had on for years. He points out that he has invented a game called a "Video Virus" in which through the use of a special technology he can push a button and insert himself onto any screen and perform any one of a number of actions. When asked by another character what this is about, he answers: "Well, we all know the psychic powers of the televised image. But we need to capitalize on it and make it work for us instead of working for it." This theme is taken up in two other scenes. In one short clip, a history graduate student shoots the video camera he is using to film himself, indicating a self-consciousness about the power of the image and the ability to control it at the same time. In a scene with which the film concludes, a carload of people, each equipped with a Super 8 camera, drives up to a large hill and the people throw their cameras into a canyon. The film ends with the images being recorded by the cameras as they cascade to the bottom of the cliff in what suggests a moment of release and liberation. Within the postmodern culture depicted in these three films, there are no master narratives at work, no epic modernist dreams, nor is there any element of social agency that accompanies the individualized sense of dropping out, of self-consciously courting chaos and uncertainty.

In many respects, these movies present a slacker culture of white youth who are both terrified and fascinated by the media, who appear overwhelmed by "the danger and wonder of future technologies, the banality of consumption, the thrill of brand names, [and] the difficulty of sex in alienated relationships" (Kopkind 183). The significance of these films rests, in part, in their attempt to capture the sense of powerlessness that increasingly cuts across race, class, and generations. But what is missing from these films along with the various books, articles, and reportage concerning what is often called "The Nowhere Generation," "Generation X," "13thGen," or "Slackers" is any sense of the larger political and social conditions in which youth are being framed. What in fact should be seen as a social commentary about "dead-end capitalism" emerges simply as a celebration of refusal dressed up in a rhetoric of aesthetics, style, fashion, and solipsistic protests. Within this type of commentary, postmodern criticism is useful but limited because of its often theoretical inability to take up the relationship between identity and power, biography and the commodification of everyday life, or the limits of agency in a post-Fordist economy as part of a broader project of possibility linked to issues of history, struggle, and transformation. The contours of this
type of criticism are captured in a comment by Andrew Kopkind, a keen observer of slacker culture:

The domestic and economic relationship that have created the new consciousness are not likely to improve in the few years left in this century, or in the years of the next, when the young slackers will be middle-agers. The choices for young people will be increasingly constricted. In a few years, a steady job at a mall outlet or a food chain may be all that's left for the majority of college graduates. Life is more and more like a lottery—is a lottery—with nothing but the luck of the draw determining whether you get a recording contract, get your screenplay produced, or get a job with your M.B.A. Slacking is thus a rational response to casino capitalism, the randomization of success, and the utter arbitrariness of power. If no talent is still enough, why bother to hone your skills? If it is impossible to find a good job, why not slack out and enjoy life? (187)

The pedagogical challenge represented by the emergence of a postmodern generation of youth has not been lost on advertisers and market research analysts. According to a 1992 roper Organization study, the current generation of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds has an annual buying power of 125 billion. Addressing the interests and tastes of this generation, “McDonald's, for instance, has introduced hip-hop music and images to promote burgers and fries, ditto Coca-Cola, with its frenetic commercials touting Coca-Cola Classic” (Hollingsworth 30). Benetton, Reebok, and other companies have followed suit in their attempts to mobilize the desires, identities, and buying patterns of a new generation of youth. What appears as a dire expression of the postmodern condition to some theorists, becomes for others a challenge to invent new market strategies for corporate interests. In this scenario, youth may be experiencing the conditions of postmodernism, but corporate advertisers are attempting to theorize a pedagogy of consumption as part of a new way of appropriating postmodern differences. What educators need to do is to make the pedagogical more political by addressing both the conditions through which they teach and what it means to learn from a generation that is experiencing life in a way that is vastly different from the representations offered in modernist versions of schooling. The emergence of the electronic media coupled with a diminishing faith in the power of human agency has undermined the traditional visions of schooling and the meaning of pedagogy. The language of lesson plans and upward mobility and the forms of teacher authority on which it was based has been radically delegitimated by the recognition that culture and power are central to the authority/knowledge relationship. Modernism’s faith in the past has given way to a future for which traditional markers no longer make sense.

Postmodern Education

In this section, I want to develop the thesis that postmodern discourses offer the promise, but not the solution, for alerting educators to a new generation of border youth. Indications of the conditions and characteristics that define such youth are far from uniform or agreed upon. But the daunting fear of
essentializing the category of youth should not deter educators and cultural critics from addressing the effects on a current generation of young people who appear hostage to the vicissitudes of a changing economic order with its legacy of diminished hopes, on the one hand, and a world of schizoid images, proliferating public spaces and an increasing fragmentation, uncertainty, and randomness that structures postmodern daily life on the other. Central to this issue is whether educators are dealing with a new kind of student forged within organizing principles shaped by the intersection of the electronic image, popular culture, and a dire sense of indeterminacy. Differences aside, the concept of border youth represents less a distinct class, membership, or social group than a referent for naming and understanding the emergence of a set of conditions, translations, border crossings, attitudes, and dystopian sensibilities among youth that cut across race and class and that represent a fairly new phenomenon. In this scenario, the experiences of contemporary Western youth in the late modern world are being ordered around coordinates that structure the experience of everyday life outside of the unified principles and maps of certainty that offered up comfortable and secure representations to previous generations. Youth increasingly rely less on the maps of modernism to construct and affirm their identities; instead, they are faced with the task of finding their way through a decentered cultural landscape no longer caught in the grip of a technology of print, closed narrative structures, or the certitude of a secure economic future. The emerging technologies which construct and position youth represent interactive terrains that cut across “language and culture, without narrative requirements, without character complexities…. Narrative complexity [has given] way to design complexity; story [has given] way to a sensory environment” (Parkes 50).

A postmodern pedagogy must address the shifting attitudes, representations, and desires of this new generation of youth being produced within the current historical, economic, and cultural juncture. For example, the terms of identity and the production of new maps of meaning must be understood within new hybridized cultural practices inscribed in relations of power that intersect differently with race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. But such differences must be understood not only in terms of the context of their struggles but also through a shared language of resistance that points to a project of hope and possibility. This is where the legacy of a critical modernism becomes valuable in that it reminds us of the importance of the language of public life, democratic struggle, and the imperatives of liberty, equality, and justice.

Educators need to understand how different identities among youth are being produced in spheres generally ignored by schools. Included here would be an analysis of how pedagogy works to produce, circulate, and confirm particular forms of knowledge and desires in those diverse public and popular spheres where sounds, images, print, and electronic culture attempt
to harness meaning for and against the possibility of expanding social justice
and human dignity. Shopping malls, street communities, video halls, coffee
shops, television culture, and other elements of popular culture must be­
come serious objects of school knowledge. But more is at stake here than an
ethnography of those public spheres where individual and social identities
are constructed and struggled over. More important is the need to fashion
a language of ethics and politics that serves to discriminate between relations
that do violence and those that promote diverse and democratic public
cultures through which youth and others can understand their problems and
concerns as part of a larger effort to interrogate and disrupt the dominant
narratives of national identity, economic privilege, and individual empower­
ment.

Pedagogy must redefine its relationship to modernist forms of culture,
privilege, and canonicity, and serve as vehicle of translation and cross­
fertilization. Pedagogy as a critical cultural practice needs to open up new
institutional spaces in which students can experience and define what it
means to be cultural producers capable of both reading different texts and
producing them, of moving in and out of theoretical discourses but never
losing sight of the need to theorize for themselves. Moreover if critical
educators are to move beyond the postmodern prophets of hyperreality,
politics must not be exclusively fashioned to plugging into the new electron­
ically mediated community. The struggle for power is not merely about
expanding the range of texts that constitute the politics of representation, it
is also about struggling within and against those institutions that wield
economic, cultural, and economic power.

It is becoming increasingly fashionable to argue for a postmodern
pedagogy in which it is important to recognize that “One chief effect of
electronic hypertext lies in the way it challenges now conventional assump­
tions about teachers, learners, and the institutions they inhabit” (Landow
120). As important as this concern is for refiguring the nature of the
relationship between authority and knowledge and the pedagogical condi­
tions necessary for decentering the curriculum and opening up new pedagog­
ical spaces, it does not go far enough and runs the risk of degenerating into
a another hyped up methodological fix. Postmodern pedagogy must be more
sensitive to how teachers and students negotiate both texts and identities, but
it must do so through a political project that articulates its own authority
within a critical understanding of how the self recognizes others as subjects
rather than as objects of history. In other words, postmodern pedagogy must
address how power is written on, within, and between different groups as part
of a broader effort to reimagine schools as democratic public spheres.
Authority in this instance is linked to auto-critique and becomes a political
and ethical practice through which students become accountable to them­
selves and others. By making the political project of schooling primary,
educators can define and debate the parameters through which communities
of difference defined by relations of representation and reception within overlapping and transnational systems of information, exchange, and distribution can address what it means to be educated as a practice of empowerment. In this instance, schools can be rethought as public spheres, as "borderlands of crossing" (Clifford 134), actively engaged in producing new forms of democratic community organized as sites of translation, negotiation, and resistance.

What is also needed by postmodern educators is a more specific understanding of how affect and ideology mutually construct the knowledge, resistances, and sense of identity that students negotiate as they work through dominant and rupturing narratives attempting in different ways to secure particular forms of authority. Fabienne Worth is right in castigating postmodern educators for undervaluing the problematic nature of the relationship between "desire and the critical enterprise" (8). A postmodern pedagogy needs to address how the issue of authority can be linked to democratic processes in the classroom that do not promote pedagogical terrorism and yet still offer representations, histories, and experiences that allow students to critically address the construction of their own subjectivities as they simultaneously engage in an ongoing "process of negotiation between the self and other" (26).

The conditions and problems of contemporary border youth may be postmodern, but they will have to be engaged through a willingness to interrogate the world of public politics while at the same time recognizing the limits of postmodernism's more useful insights. In part, this means rendering postmodernism more political by appropriating modernity's call for a better world while abandoning its linear narratives of Western history, unified culture, disciplinary order, and technological progress. In this case, the pedagogical importance of uncertainty and indeterminacy can be rethought through a modernist notion of the dream-world in which youth and others can shape, without the benefit of master narratives, the conditions for producing new ways of learning, engaging, and positing the possibilities for social struggle and solidarity. Radical educators cannot subscribe either to an apocalyptic emptiness or to a politics of refusal that celebrates the immediacy of experience over the more profound dynamic of social memory and moral outrage forged within and against conditions of exploitation, oppression, and the abuse of power. Postmodern pedagogy needs to confront history as more than simulacrum and ethics as something other than the casualty of incommensurable language games. Postmodern educators need to take a stand without standing still, to engage their own politics as public intellectuals without essentializing the ethical referents to address human suffering.

In addition, a postmodern pedagogy needs to go beyond a call for refiguring the curriculum so as to include new informational technologies; instead, it needs to assert a politics that makes the relationship among
authority, ethics, and power central to a pedagogy that expands rather than closes down the possibilities of a radical democratic society. Within this discourse, images do not dissolve reality into simply another text; on the contrary, representations become central to revealing the structures of power relations at work in the public, schools, society, and larger global order. Difference does not succumb to fashion in this logic (another touch of ethnicity); instead, difference becomes a marker of struggle in an ongoing movement toward a shared conception of justice and a radicalization of the social order.

Penn State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

Notes

1 For a succinct examination of postmodernism’s challenge to a modernist conception of history, see Vattimo, especially chapter one.
2 A number of excellent anthologies provide readings in postmodernism that cut across a variety of fields. Some of the more recent examples include Jencks; Natioli and Hutcheon; and Docherty.
3 I treat this issue in great detail in Schooling and Border.
4 See Clarke, especially Chapter 2. Clarke’s analysis has less to do with a complex reading of postmodernism than a defensive reaction of his own refusal to take seriously a postmodern critique of the modernist elements in Marxist theories.
5 Needless to say, one can find a great deal of theoretical material that refuses to dismiss postmodern discourses so easily and in doing so performs a theoretical service in unraveling its progressive from its reactionary tendencies. Early examples of this work can be found in Foster; Hebdige; Vattimo; Ross; Hutcheon; Collins; and Connor. More recent examples include Nicholson; Lasch; Chambers; Aronowitz and Giroux, Postmodern; Best and Kellner; Denzin; and Owens.

Works Cited


366 Journal of Advanced Composition


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