Violence & Generation X

How the New Right is Managing the "Moral Panic" Through Television and Teen Films

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Screen Violence

The continual "cultural wars" between "Generation X" ("baby busters" whose birth years begin with 1961, aged 11-35), and New Right "baby boomers" (whose birth years range from 1946 to 1960), around the issue of violence as represented in the popular cultural forms of film and television provide critically concerned art educators with an opportune moment to examine how conservative rhetoric has made "moral panic" an object of current discourses. This highly-charged debate, now literally and symbolically represented by the censorship that "V-chip" technology provides, is explored in this essay from a seemingly non-populist position given the current tide against the proliferation of violence. It is argued that the issues that surround violence veil broader socio-economic concerns.

1The term Generation X, or the so called "13th generation," is taken from Neil Howe & Bill Strauss' 13th Generation: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail? (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). It is not meant to be applied to a predominantly white middle class "twentysomething" consumer crowd. Rather it is a generation "that reaches across the board—rich and poor, black and white, Hispanic and Asian, male and female, celebrity and everyman... Babies born between 1961 and 1964 are tired of hearing themselves called ‘baby boomers’ when they know they don’t carry the usual hippie-cum-yuppie baggage" (p.12). Furthermore, not all "boomers" are conservative and right leaning. I am referring to those boomers who define themselves as the "moral majority," as well as those who look "back to the future" for school reform. In art education, the figure of Ralph Smith whose "excellence" crusade regarding art educational curricula would qualify for such a categorization.

2Moral panic has now become the key psychological mood of postmodern culture. See Arthur Kroker, Marloushe Kroker and David Cook. Panic Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Postmodern Scene. (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1989).

3Since the writing of this essay President Clinton has signed a bill on February 11, 1996 mandating that every television set manufactured must be equipped with V-microchip technology which would allow parents to censor violence on network programming. The V-chip automatically blocks out programming that exceeds predetermined levels of violence, sexuality among coarse language as seen fit by the private whims of the household’s "moral guardians." Invented by a Canadian from Calgary, the V-chip received early approval by Keith Spicer, the chairman of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications (CRTC) who has been in the forefront of pushing the U.S. to "chip in" (to) Canada’s effort at eliminating gratuitous violence from television.

4"Girlie" culture refers to a specific performative posture (cf. Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. [New York: Routledge, 1990]) by teenage girls against the adult world whereby the dualisms of bitch/whore are played with as "subversion as affirmation." Although Madonna may well be the paradigm case of this posturing it is in the "girlie" music industry where this is most evident with such groups as Shampoo-Pop, the GO-GO’s, and especially the videos of Heather Novas and Juliana Hatfields.
male’s technical phallus by occupying its driver’s seat. With it she roams over both a figural (i.e., moral) and literal desert in the post-apocalyptic world of 2033 where parents play no role what-so-ever. This tough-girl image, with a life-style wedded to sex, drugs, and violence, is the very exemplar of what the “new” American and Canadian conservatism (by the early 1990s, over a decade old!) rails against: “a youth in crisis.” The more spectacular aspects of this “crisis”—teen crime as teenage entertainment (“kill for thrills”), teen delinquency, teen pregnancies, teen suicide, demon and Satan worship, gang and cult involvement—have been mobilized by the neo-conservative Right for the articulation of a moral panic (i.e., a felt crisis, or “affective epidemic” of a general societal breakdown).6

The counter-hegemonic activity of struggle (i.e., the logic of the contingent social for drawing the line between state and civil society) takes place in any number of locations—in law, the market place, the family, the school—but it is popular culture that is especially an important place for a conjunctural analysis

5 I am using the term “phallus” in the Lacanian sense as that signifier which is empty (i.e., has no signification other than as acting in the capacity of a transcendental signifier that holds the system together). It must be noted that the status of the phallus is a fraud. It cannot be attained. Psychic castration occurs when its fraudulence is unveiled.

6 “Affective epidemic” is Lawrence Grossberg’s term for a fetishized and mobilized site/sight/site that is invested with a disproportioniate value as to what it is worth, which is then saturated daily by panics. For example, Elvis can still attract necrophilic fascination because he was always a promotional simulacrum who could be wrapped around any passing mood. See Grossberg’s We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 284. In the British context, Angela McRobbie discusses the crucial role that moral panics play in conservative politics. See “The Moral Panic in the Age of the Postmodern Media,” Postmodernism and Popular Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). In the German-Austrian context, moral panic is localized against the National Front as represented by neo-Fascist youth groups. See Dieter Baacke, Michaela Their, Christian Grüninger and Frank Lindemann’s Rock Von Rechts: Medienpädagogische Handreichung 3, Schriften zur Medienpädagogik 14.

where the ideas about the world, and the forms of their expression are made, transformed, and circulated.7 Although the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of the popular is difficult to capture, since it includes the print media as well, it has been particularly the “screen violence” of television and film that has become the specific site/cite/site of criticism by any number of right-wing, moral-majority groups to try and maintain their hegemony through crisis.8 Here the simple formula that attributes direct imitation to screen violence rules: a “monkey see, monkey do” syndrome which is as old as Plato’s complaint against Athenian youth (boys, that is) who were said to be unable to distinguish the difference between what was allegorical and what was literal. The common sense formula that youth simply mimic and identify unproblematically with screen characters, especially the violent ones, or are easily persuaded by the “satanic” lyrics of rock ‘n’ roll, remains the bedrock argument of the Right to mobilize moral unease and indignation. In other words, according to this tired argument, youth easily mix up reality with fiction. They are incapable of distinguishing between media modalities, like

7 The language of articulation, hegemony, overdetermination, and conjunction is that of Antonio Gramsci as utilized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (London: Verso, 1985). It should be pointed out immediately that the so-called hegemonic “struggle” is a complex process which involves pressure groups and self-help groups that counter and contest the vocality of the traditional moral guardians of the Right by directly influencing the media. There is no clearly defined moral panic but a “media flow” of debate between them. See Angela McRobbie, 1992. The complexity is captured by James Davison Hunter’s Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (New York: Basic Books, 1992). I use the term “popular culture” to avoid any misunderstanding that this is to be equated with “mass media” which assumes that audiences are the dupes of its ideological effects. Rather, what makes a text (film, television sit-com, series, soap opera etc.) popular is its ability to be polysemic in its interpretative possibilities. A text’s survival based on its ratings and economic return relies on the measure of its wide appeal.

8 In the interests of space I wish only to quickly point to the magnitude of this pressure and its long standing history. In the ’50s and early ’60s television programs like Dragnet and The Untouchables were criticized for encouraging teenage delinquency. In the ’70s, Peggy Charren, the founder of Action for Children’s Television in the United States, lobbied to set limits on the advertising time allowed during children’s programs. More recently, U.S. Senator Paul Simon has led a crusade against TV violence, while U.S. Attorney General Janet
news violence from cartoon violence, for instance. An ideology of protection (most commonly in the form of censorship) is then mobilized “for their own good” as the Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller so succinctly put it in the title of one of her books.9 Usually a sensational murder committed by an adolescent (the general rule here being the younger the killer, and the more heinous the crime, the more sensational and dramatic will be its rhetorical effects) is promptly linked to some horror film, television program, fantasy game or war toy that the teen murderer has recently seen, or fantasized which consequently influenced the crime through its powerful imagery. A causal link is then posited, even when months later after the teen’s trial it was found that the alleged horror film(s) had not been involved.10

Reno has threatened the movie and television industries with anti-violence legislation unless they clean up their acts voluntarily. Terry Rakolta of Americans for Responsible Television sees TV as the only thing that can be controlled since drugs and education can’t be, thus making television the scapegoat for all of society’s ills. As recently as August 1995, President Clinton has seriously thought of endorsing a V-chip—a device that would block out incoming programs that have a high “V” for violence rating. (The U.S. National Coalition on Television Violence lists such acts as grabbing and shoulder tapping as acts as grabbing and shoulder tapping as violent acts, making the definition of violence almost a meaningless task.) In Canada, a new anti-violence code has been put in place, with CRTC Chairman Keith Spicer also thinking about endorsing the V-chip, making parents instant censors. In England, Mary Whitehouse is Britain’s leading moral majority campaigner who made headlines by attacking the soap opera EastEnders for its excessive verbal abuse. For the British situation on the campaign against television violence see David Buckingham, Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy (London and Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press, 1993), pp. 3–14. In Germany, France, and Austria there have been similar lobbies against excessive violence. Austria’s public television ORF introduced more restrictive measures in 1993. Surprisingly, northern countries such as Sweden and Norway have always had tough measures regarding screen violence whereas pornography and nudity have no censorship.

9 Alice Miller, For Their Own Good (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984). Miller is best known for her development of “schwartz pedagogy” which argues that many educators inadvertently do more damage than good because they remain insensitive to the curriculum as seem through the eyes of their students.

10 This happened with the famous case concerning the killing of 2 year-old James Bulger by two 10 year-old boys in England in February 1993. It was claimed that the two youths had been influenced by the horror film Child

Why adults are not affected in the same way as teenagers by screen violence is attributed to their enhanced discriminating abilities; their stronger fortitude and moral fiber. They are said to be more responsible citizens since they are “grown up.” However, a common finding by media researchers is an effect known as “developmental disdain” or the “third person effect.” While adults claim that youth are unable to psychically protect themselves from the effects of simulated violence, they themselves claim to be immune.11 This same common sense

Play 3 which one of the boy’s father had rented. Several months later it was discovered that no such tape was ever rented. In Canada, the Montréal Massacre where a gunman, Marc Lépine, shot and killed fourteen women in the École Polytechnique in 1991, was attributed to his anti-feminism; his actions were said to be prompted by the media violence he watched. The Montréal based anti-violence group known as Facijen staged the creation of an outdoor sculpture where over 12,000 toy guns, and GI Joe figures were collected from schoolchildren, heaped on a pile, and unveiled on the second anniversary of the massacre. In a recent film, The Program (1993), about the vigors of making it on a college football team, several of the team members lie vertically, one after the other, on the white line that separates traffic on a busy highway, as cars whiz past them by on both sides. It is both a dare and a way to “pump” themselves up for the ensuing game. The week following the films release, three deaths and four injuries were reported throughout the United States as boys tried to mimic the prank. The scene was subsequently cut from the film. Stories such as these make it appear that there is a direct correlation between acts of murder and playing with war toys, or that exposure to high school pranks will be imitated somewhere, sometime. Stories of juvenile murder appear regularly that are attributed to media, war toys or dangerous mind games. Ronald Lampasi killed his stepfather and wounded his mother in 1983. Then at the age of sixteen he claimed he was acting out a scenario from the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons. This was followed by the concern about the effects of the game and its relationship to Satanism. For an opposing view see George Gerbner, “Television Violence: The Power and the Peril.” In Gender, Race and Class in Media, eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 547–557, and Alison Bass, “Do Slasher Films Breed Real-Life Violence?”, pp. 185–189, same volume. Bass cites numerous incidents and “evidence” that there is a direct cause between screen violence and the execution of violent crimes.

11 Another variation of this “third person effect” is pointed out by David Sholle when teaching media education. He finds that often adults and students are willing to be critical of media texts pointing to the surface effects of sexism, racism, hyper-patriotism, but then it turns out that it is always “other people” who are manipulated by the media, and not “them.” See Peter McLaren, Rhonda Hammer, David Sholle, & Susan Reilly, Rethinking Media Literacy: A Critical Pedagogy of Representation (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 240.
prejudice, in fact, occurs all the way down the various age differentiations amongst siblings. The older teenagers claim that their younger brothers and sisters should not be watching screen violence because they will begin to mimic it, while they themselves are more mature and immune, needing no such "protection." Within their logic *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* all of a sudden are a bad influence since their younger siblings are said never to have engaged in karate kicking before the advent of the series. That aggressive behavior and conflict resolution is part of children's play culture is not given the weight that it deserves. Rather, alarmist and spectacular incidents such as "swarming" and "bullying" are singled out as instances of increased violence on the playground which are blamed on televised influences.

It would require the dissemination of an enormous amount of statistical data, which claims that there has been an actual decrease in violent crime, before there would be any change in the spectacular perceptions that have been already mobilized. Despite some increases in violent crimes committed by juveniles in the 1980s, the aggregate arrest rates for serious violent offenses and for serious property offenses committed by U.S. adolescents have declined since the mid-1970s. A U.S. Congress report points out that only a small subset of adolescent offenders commit multiple serious offenses. Likewise, there was no actual rise in adolescent crime during the '50s to precipitate the kind of vociferous public response witnessed in the form of debates concerning censorship, television effects, comic books, and rock 'n' roll. And while female arrest rates due to criminal behavior have gone up statistically, there is no way of knowing whether this has been due to the changes in attitude toward women in general, or whether there has been an increase in the number of crimes women commit. And while homicide is the leading cause of death amongst African-Americans aged fifteen to nineteen, is this higher incidence of African-American violent crime a marker of cultural difference, or rather is it representative of differential policing methods? Again, the answer is open to speculation as to the "work" (policies, actions) the statistical evidence is meant to mobilize. If nonnuclear families contribute to a decrease in parental supervision of children, are they then contributing to juvenile crime? The use of statistical crime figures to incite panic against contemporary youth who are compared unfavorably to a previous "golden age" where social stability and strong moral discipline acted as a deterrent for delinquency and disorder has historically been a typical ploy of conservatives. In fact, when scrutiny is applied to such claims, no "golden age" has ever been found.  

While it is only the extremely pathologically ill teens who are unable to distinguish "reality" from fiction (i.e., teens who spend an excessive amount of time watching television which can result in the atrophy of their imaginations, living in impossible home conditions where heroine addiction and parental neglect are sickeningly obvious) these sensational exceptions have become the neo-conservative Right's way to discipline and keep youth under surveillance by presenting such instances as if they were normative everyday occurrences. In this way the breakdown of traditional forms of authority, patriarchy, law and order, and the institutions of their enforcement like the school, church, and the traditional family, receive the status of renewed leadership and moral guidance. And although it is youth in general who are being targeted in the United States, the threat of youth has been specifically and

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15 The "magical number" that is said to fry a kid's brains is set at twenty-five hours of television viewing or more a week. See Dorothy G. and Jerome L. Singer, *The House of Make-Believe: Play and the Developing Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). If the Nielsen figures show that the American child born into a home watches an average of 7 hours a day, then virtually all kid's brains have already been fried!

16 In Bruno Bettelheim's terms the "generation gap" exists only as a time of youth dis-ease and economic non-profitability. See Bruno Bettelheim,
symbolically centralized to African-American and Hispanic-American youth. The African-American youth is the internal Other that defines a threat to the stability of the American social order, much like the neo-Nazis youth groups are the internal Other in Germany and Austria, while the Hooligans play a similar role in Britain. The films of African-American film makers: Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Malcolm X* (1992), John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) and *Poetic Justice* (1993), and Mario Van Peebles’s *New Jack City* (1991) were said to incite violence amongst youth audiences. Rumors circulated that actual fights and squabbles broke out in the theaters upon their first screening. In Howe & Strauss’ 17 "flip-hip" description of the Generation X, it is quite clear that the threat of disorder is coming from this New Jack antiworld. Gangster rap is packaged, commodified and then bought up by a large population of white youth who identify with its celebration of sex, violence, and rebelliousness. Their description succinctly captures the fear that is spread.

New Jack 13ers perceive an outside world that does not like them, does not want them, does not trust them, and (as they see it) has nothing to offer them. Glancing across at the financial towers and suburban influence that few of them will ever touch, New Jackers shed even the most basic social conventions that mark a civilized society. Hear them rap a melodyless cant of sexism, racism, and soulless mayhem, celebrating the very nihilism that older generations blame them for.

Watch them swagger around in symbolic uniforms—backwards caps, shades, leather jackets, combat fatigues, pump-sneakers, or jackboots—that conjure up the soul-dead violence of robots. Avoid them as their thug-armies rampage for random victims. Hand them the keys—quick—when they carjack you. Fear them as they commit “opportunity crimes” against random passerby, or “hate crimes” against women, gays, or Asian shopkeepers, or “business crimes” against each other. Shoot them down, ship them out, lock them up. If you can catch them. And you’ll never catch all of them.18

In Henry Louis Gates, Jr. words: “When you’re faced with a stereotype, you can disavow it or you can embrace it and exaggerate it to the nth degree. The rappers take the white Western culture’s worst fear of black men and make a game out of it.”19

**Trash and Talk: The Medias of Support**

The articulation of the object(s) of moral panic is overdetermined by a number of other media discourses besides feature length films and television’s simulated killings which criss-cross and reinforce each other constantly to sustain an affective media impact, and to keep the “youth crisis” current and reproducible. Foremost among these supportive media industries has been “trash TV” (A Current Affair, America’s Most Wanted) and daytime “confessional” television talk-shows. In the former case, the pursuit of America’s “most wanted,” and the exhibition of what is sold as various perversities and aberrations, is staged in a realistic style which tries to achieve a documentary realism that blurs the distinction between it and “actual” news reportage. This effect is achieved by using High 8, hand held video cameras; mobile, on-location shooting using

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17 Howe and Strauss’ book on the 13th generation (Generation X) is a literal compendium of Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down*, (1993), where D-FENDS (Michael Douglas) turns psychotic and begins killing off everything that middle-America perceives as a threat to its stability: Koreans who can’t speak proper English, grocery prices that are too high, roads that are under constant repair, gang members who harass innocent victims, neo-Nazis who foster hate, the hypocritical hospitality of fast food establishments, the ostentatious display of wealth (private golf courses and huge homes) by wealthy business men and plastic surgeons. Howe and Strauss write as if the moralizing Baby-Boomers want to eliminate 13ers in the same way as D-FENDS by describing the scene/seen from the 13er’s point of view. Unusual.

18 Ibid., p. 121.

19 Ibid., p. 140.
natural lighting; actual policemen and policewomen; and “natural” actors as criminals, along with documentary newsreel evidence to further strengthen its modality.20

“Confessional” talk-shows present the other symbolic “nodal point” for the articulation of violence.21 The show’s host introduces topics and themes that provide a stamp of authenticity to the social crisis by way of bodily displays such as tears and emotional outbursts. Guests are invited to relate (confess) their personal tragedy to a studio audience. The confessionary mode is offered more for its exhibitionary value; it is the act or performance that is proffered.22 Guests’ confessions are communication acts that affirm, articulate and capture something, a pseudo-materiality23 that is “shared” in a culture—about deviance, transgression, and the emotion of guilt. Psychoanalytically speaking, these confessions embody the very Thing24 a society is unable to express symbolically, which is its “spectral supplement” or “spectral apparition.”25 The Thing as a Master-Signifier (i.e., as a signifier without a signified) is that something about which the confessors need not make any positive claims. Spectral apparitions are foreclosed from such talk. So whether the talk is about illicit affairs, divorce rates, freaks, serial killers, gangster rap, etc. as what are taken to be the current societal exemplars of moral panic, the ultimate paradox of such symbolizing gestures is that society is held together by these very transgressions that appear on trash television, which, paradoxically prevent any form of society’s closure into some harmonious whole where violence has been eliminated. In other words, the very absence of a harmonious society acts as a spectral apparition (as Thing) enabling every confessed “immoral act” as yet another failed attempt to achieve a peaceful harmonious loving world. Moral panic rests, therefore, on an impossibility, an unfathomable limit that cannot be objectivized, located in what Lacan calls the Real, a space that is beyond language. Taken together, these confessional acts point beyond language to a bond linking its members together and implying a shared relationship with such an impossibility. However, what is important about this confessional practice is that it is the act that is most important26—and not the evidence or the penalties that go along with the confession (e.g., the banal penance given to confessants by priests for what appear to be grievous sins). The confession assures the stability of the social order (i.e., the recognition of the Big Other).27 The self-incriminating subject

20 Modality, as the perceived reality of the content, can be characterized as being very weak (i.e., artificial like a cartoon strip), or very strong (i.e., like the news). See Bob Hodge and David Tripp, Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 126–131. The spectacle and allure of trash television was meant to be ironically and socially critiqued by Oliver Stone’s recent Natural Born Killers (1994) where, in the tradition of Bonnie and Clyde, two psychotic killers—Micky and Mallory Knox as Generation X representatives (both of whom are products of abusive families) become media stars with the nation as their fan club watching the chase on the news. The character of Morton Downey, Jr., who was once considered the king of trash TV, appears as a reporter in Stone’s film whose broadcast M & M Murders is a mise-en-abîme of his once successful New York late night talk show. Stone presents Morton Downey, Jr.’s character as a self-serving, ego-grabbing, arrogant television host who will do anything to boost ratings by interviewing “America’s Most Wanted.” Ironically his character is played by Michael Downey, Jr.

21 Laclau and Mouffe (1985) utilize this Lacanian term to designate locations where a number of “floating signifiers” that circulate in an ideological field are temporarily sewn together. Each nodal point harbors a “master-signifier.”

22 The confessional mode as developed from the Church discourse and introduced into the modernist discourses of science (i.e., anthropology, ethnography, psychiatry) was first developed by Michel Foucault, especially in his The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

23 This pseudo-materiality which subverts the classic ontological oppositions of reality and illusion is worked out by Jacques Derrida. See his Spectres de Marx (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp. 25–36.


26 The necessity of specularity and its entertainment value is what finally did in Phil Donahue. His ratings could no longer keep up with the more sensational talk shows.

27 Another psychoanalytic term which refers to Jacques Lacan’s claim that what gives force to the institutionalization of the law is a symbolic order that is already in place.
on talk-TV makes a double suggestion through his or her public confession, presenting the audience with the paradox of both an identification, as well as a distanciation: first, the confessional experience makes it appear that the guest is just like us with a similar moral structure as to what is right and wrong, and second: how the guest is so utterly different than us because of what he or she has been through. In this way both the horrors and mundane problems become the extreme limits of the confessional discourse. With horrors, the limits of the social are not contested; the Thing as spectral apparition is confirmed solidified.

TV talk-shows are, therefore, a cauldron for a society's psychic ills. The audience is usually seeded with members who themselves have gone through a similar crisis in their lives. It is not unusual, for example, on Oprah to invite guests who reflect the show's focus (i.e., AIDS "victims," child abuse sufferers, wives of convicted rapists, and so on). The distinction between invited guests and audience becomes blurred. Sally Jessie Raphael, for example, often invites a member from the audience to provide a summative analysis of what advice he or she would offer the invited couples to solve their domestic disputes. The community of viewers on most talk-shows enters into a position that approximates "citizenship" in as much as they participate in the proceedings, even if their participation is more often only as witnesses to the testimony that is being given. Geraldo is the exemplar here. Although most talk-shows are pre-recorded, usually there are "live" phone-in questions from the larger viewing audience at home (e.g. Donahue). These pre-recorded phone calls add to the actuality of the event, and reinforce the idea that the "critical problem" exists in society as a whole, making it a common concern. An expert is usually called in to confirm the authenticity of the testimony, and how best then to "manage" it. Both Donahue and Sally followed this model. During this time, often traditional values of the nuclear family are reinstated, and the power of patriotism reconfirmed in establishing the nation as one big family. The host is never the expert, but plays more the role of a concerned citizen, mediator, and interlocutor, who brings guests and audience together. Of late, many of these talk show hosts, especially Sally Jessie Raphael, but also Ricki Lake, have become catalysts for reuniting "lost" family members to reinstate a sense of "community," and to restore dispersed and dysfunctional families (e.g., dads and mothers who had abandoned their children, adopted siblings in search of their "natural" families, runaway teenagers who want to come back into the fold, and so on).

Geraldo, The Oprah Winfrey Show, Donahue, Sally Jesse Raphael, Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, the defunct Morton Downey, Jr. Show (a latenight exception) to name the most popular, help promote the spread of a social paranoia where no one is safe anywhere, not even in "small town" America. The Ricki Lake Show takes a quirky side to the youth crisis by having teenagers "confess" to each other how much they hate one another, or how confused they are concerning pregnancy, love, dating and other matters of the heart. Either way, teenagers come across as having a confused and bizarre set of values confirming that in a postmodern society adolescence is not a time of essential innocence, as it was portrayed in the modernist era, but that are all youth are essentially guilty. Supplementing this paranoia concerning youth are slick news shows like Hard Copy, Prime Time, Inside Edition, the occasional 24 hrs., and numerous television specials that focus on particular topics such as teen pregnancy, teen suicide, teen runaways, and teen prostitution. News magazines like Time, Atlantic, MacLeans and Newsweek, which represent the moral voice of white middle-class Americans and Canadians, regularly run feature articles on the youth crisis which further fuel the fears of a more mobile, middle-to-upper conservative class who keep themselves informed of current events through these magazines.28

28 Examples include: Atlantic's cover, "Growing Up Scared" (Karl Zinsmeister, June, 1990); Time's cover, "The Deadly Love Affair Between America's Youth and Firearms" (Jon D. Hull, "A Boy and His Gun," 1993); Newsweek's cover, "Teen Violence: Wild in the Streets" (Barbara Kantrowitz, "Wild in the Streets," 1993); Time's cover "Our Violent Kids" (Anastasia Toufexis, June, 1989); David Ansen's "The Kid's Aren't Alright: A Powerful Portrait of Deadly, Disaffected Teens, Newsweek, June 1. The German equivalent, Der Spiegel and the Austrian equivalent, Profil have been reporting on the same "youth crisis" with equally vivid front cover designs.
Boomer Nostalgia and Xers Counter-Nostalgia

The moralizers who have articulated the moral panic against the X Generation are Baby-boomers, those 35 years and older who are over-represented in society.29 Here a nostalgia for a childhood they remember can sometimes bring about some rather comically naive results. In April of 1992, for instance, the Toronto Globe and Mail carried a story about a Vancouver elementary school in the suburb of Coquitlam where a group of parents introduced skipping, marbles, and balls to children twice a week during recess because they felt that these children had an impoverished playing culture by watching too much television.30 With the institutionalization of charter schools wherein parents have a direct say in the school’s curriculum more regressive measures such as this one can be expected. Tipper Gore’s31 book, Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society, is another exemplar in this regard. Her action to have a warning label (an X-rating) placed on record albums at the Parents’ Music Resource Center hearings participates in the same simplistic copy-cat logic. This ideology of Boomer protection is perhaps best exemplified by The Children’s Defense Fund, the Center for Humanities and Guidance Associates (a rhetorically impressive sounding title) who offer North American teachers a flood of slickly produced and moralistic videos for the school market. The catalogue for Guidance Associates lists over five hundred filmstrips, slide series and video tapes on topics from drug abuse to “values clarification,” all stressing a prescriptive and normative ideology.32

The New Right Boomers read Generation X as being dangerous, caught in a web of nihilism, delinquency and a failing school system.33 They fear that there will be an imperfect replication of the social order which disguises an economic ideology that America (and Canada) are unable to compete economically within an international market. In other words, youth are not economically productive enough—early enough. Post-adolescence breeds anomy and discontent because the work ethic has been lost. Comparisons are made with the country which currently spearheads capitalism: Japan, where children attend school 243 days of the year versus the 180 days in North America. This perception of a problematic youth is further complicated by Boomers on the Left who claim that they need a critical education having themselves been the product of student unrest and the “greening of America.”34 While not advocating traditions of the family and patriotism, they push for greater educational diversity (i.e., multiplural curriculums, antiracist education, and the need for feminist issues and queer studies). Relying mainly on French poststructuralist theories developed by Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Lacan, Althusser, Irigaray and Cixous they can be distinguished from a residual layer of “Old Left” Boomers who take their lead from the Frankfurt School of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno who

29 See Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, 1993 for demographic evidence. As an academic book, Alan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1987), which trashed the X Generation, went on to be an unprecedented best seller, eagerly read and heralded by conservative Boomers as the definitive statement as to what’s wrong with America. Bloom took his thesis on the road (included was the European circuit as well), arguing from campus to campus that the Western canon was in sore need of rehabilitation. A few years later, his student Francis Fukuyama wrote The End of History and the Last Man to vindicate Bloom’s thesis that the young will never know “true” beauty, have “true” passion or possess “true” beliefs.


33 In 13th Generation... (pp. 25–28) some 50 quotes of denigration for the X generation are presented by prominent and outspoken Boomers from a broad cross-section of society (e.g., the Hudson Institute, U.S. Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, Alan Bloom, Paul Hirsh, Louis Gerstner, Jr, President, American Express, Arthur Levine, president of Bradford College, Fortune Magazine, Erroll McDonald, the executive editor, Pantheon Books).

34 Here, not only do I point to myself, but such educators as Henry Giroux, Peter MacLaren, Michale Apple, Geoff Whitey, & Patti Lather, who write critically of the school system, but have little to offer by way of concrete prescriptive praxis being more sociologists than classroom teachers. (The allusion is to Charles A. Reich’s book, The Greening of America [New York: Bantam Books, 1971]).
described a “culture industry” wherein the masses were systematically duped into lives of servitude and consumption. Adorno, in particular, defined high culture as a standard of excellence, as the best society had to offer, consequently it could not be readily understood or consumed by the masses. He saw youth culture as a logical product of postwar media. The “gesture of adolescence” for him was that “which raves for this or that on one day with the ever-present possibility of damning it as idiocy the next.”

Generation X is thereby squeezed by both sides of the Boomer political spectrum who both bring their own brand of nostalgia for the “good old days” that make Generation X’s own culture unable to compare to it. They are simply not good enough, not critical enough, or not hard working enough.

Like the comeback tell-tale sign of the pony-tail for Boomer men, Boomer disposable incomes have defined a mobile and aging youth culture. As these 1960s rock and rollers become grandparents it appears that youth is a state that is available to everyone of any age. The difference between “real youth” (Generation X) and this “juvenilization” becomes marked as being doubly problematic: not only is Generation X very “young” (i.e., immature), but they are also unable to compare to the youth culture as authenticated by baby-boomer desire. The result of this discrimination has resulted in two very different senses of nostalgia. Generation X has tried to develop their own culture—an ahistorical nostalgia that reaches back to the ’50s as a way of critically reacting to Boomer criticism; while the baby-boomers recover the “golden” nostalgia of their own time.

An example of Generation X critical nostalgia would be Tim Burton’s Edward Scissorhands (1990) which takes place in any ’50s suburb, U.S.A. where all the houses are designed the same way, painted in the same garish candy-colored colors which clash; where all the cars are American and mid-sized, and where all the streets are spanning clean and totally empty. In the morning all the men leave for work at the same time in their cars which magically appear from automatic garage doors which all open at the same time. The housewives settle down to gossip, eat, play bridge, watch daytime TV, and do routine housework, dressed in leggings, hair-rollers, bed-jackets and garish clothes. In this bucolic seen/scene Burton situates the Generation X teenager—Edward—a freak born with scissors for hands, who believes in love and the homespun platitudes of Kim’s father (Kim narrates the story and is Edward’s primary love interest) ideas regarding laissez-faire capitalism, and the American dream. However, when Edward turns his handicap into a success story (i.e., he becomes a hair-designer and garden landscape artist extraordinare) the entire neighborhood eventually turns against him, showing the underlying savagery of Boomer middle America. Refusing the sexual advances of Mrs. Monroe, and then set-up for committing a robbery by the local rich-boy-cum-bigot, all of a sudden Edward finds himself refused by the bank for financial support, shunned by the entire neighborhood, and labeled a rapist and a criminal.

In a similar sense, Robert Zemeckis’s Back to the Future (1985) places the hero in an “Ozzie and Harriet” image of 1950s America populated by ridiculous and simplistic cardboard figures. In such films the narrative no longer exists in a linear time, but is marked by an ahistorical frozen moment that is played like a never ending loop. Likewise a film like Michael Lehmann’s Heathers (1989) is a pastiche-filled teen film that pokes fun at the nihilism that Generation X is said to wallow in.

36 The descent into nostalgia with its accompanied emergence of the pastiche style (instead of parody) is often attributed to Fredric Jameson’s now famous essay, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review, 146, 1984:53-92.
37 In much the same way David Lynch’s Blue Velvet (1989) presents the middle American town of Lumberville with its Matisse-like cut out houses, white picket fences, perfect green lawns and flowers, as a veneer for the seedy side of life that goes on behind its facade. Burton’s more recent film, A Night Before Christmas (1994), an animation story which blends Halloween and Christmas into a quirky mix, can also be read from a similar point of view (i.e., there is a kernel of horror at the very pit of the most festive time of the year). More recently, Burton has produced Batman, Forever (Joel Schumacher, 1995) which can be read as a reworking of the post-war Batman series along deconstructive lines where two sides of identity are put into flux. As in the previous Batman film, which revealed his sinister side, Batman’s frailties are once more exposed. Finally, Burton’s most recent film, Ed Wood (1995), the “worst” director ever to grace Hollywood, is almost a standing joke for what Hollywood represents!
These nostalgia films are far more critical than the golden nostalgia films of Boomer teen films that try to reassert traditional values, or which rework '50s teen films with a similar intent, (i.e., to diffuse any perceived threat to the conventional order posed by constant teen transgression). The romantic comedies of Boomer John Hughes\(^3\) present simple class issues in the context of a high school rigidly organized according to cliques (i.e., the wealthy vs. the outsiders). The message throughout his films is that girls have to wait until the end of adolescence (at graduation) to fulfill their desires of true love while boys graduate into adult commitment of a job and family. His films present the contentiousness of youth as being normal; this “everyday” banal delinquency, according to Hughes, is overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, and middle class.\(^4\) The Breakfast Club (1985), for instance, is composed of hand-me-down stereotypes from various generic teen pics: the brain, the athlete, the basket case, the princess, the criminal. Nowhere in Hughes’ films is there any attempt to deal with the reality of adolescents coping with their gay or lesbian identifications within a dominant heterosexual society. The Breakfast Club is outright homophobic in this regard.

Boomer nostalgia remakes like Francis Coppola’s Peggy Sue Got Married (1986), which celebrates a social immobility, the logic that who one is, is somehow a destiny; George Lukas’ American Graffiti (1973), which attempted to be a comment on American youth on the edge of the Vietnam era, ended up being a tribute to the Kennedian era; the films of Ron Howard, like Backdraft, Cocoon, Far and Away, and Apollo 13, which present an over-romanticized, exaggerated heroic view of America that never was, and Steven Spielberg (E.T., Jurassic Park, Hook, Casper, Indian Jones series) who has rejuvenated the comic book into


\(^4\) In an examination of six of Hughes’ films by Marianne Whatley, she found that only two of his films had men of color. Both were linked to sexual issues. One film involved a secondary character, a Chinese exchange student named Long Duc Dong. The pornographical pun on his name was used throughout the film. In the second, indirect references to penis size and sexual power of African-American men were used. See her, "Raging Hormones and Powerful Cars: The Construction of Men’s Sexuality in School Sex Education and Popular Adolescent Films," Journal of Education 170, no. 3 (1988): 100–121.

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filmic form, present the force of Hollywood’s Boomer auteurs who have defined the nostalgia landscape. The nostalgia of the above films are not linked together by the similarity of their narrative structures as they are by the values they celebrate: a time where family, community spirit, and hard work made America great; a time when “good, clean” comic books were read and kids attended Saturday matinees to watch their heroes in action. The quintessential television series of Boomer moralizers, however, was Happy Days (and spin offs like Laverne and Shirley). Here the ’50s came alive through the banality of the Cunningham family. Ron Howard (who also played Opie on the “apple-pie” series The Andy Griffith Show) was cast as the good boy Richie opposite bad boy Fonzie, the leather-jacketed biker. Whereas Marlon Brando (Laslo Benedek’s The Wild One, 1954) and James Dean (Nicholas Ray’s Rebel Without a Cause, 1955) were taken as “serious” delinquents, Fonzie eventually became part of the “all middle-American Cunningham family,” his delinquency becoming a badge of respectability and conformity.

More blatant Boomer displays of the kind of nostalgic educational system they want to see return are represented by such populist films as Stand and Deliver (Ramon Menendez, 1988) and John Avildsen’s Lean on Me (1989). Here the tactics of surveillance (through tracking), tough talk and tough love, “rote” learning, and the discipline of “hard work,” are presumed to be the appropriate measures to assure adolescent development. Lean on Me, which was based on the principal, Joe Clark, roaming the halls of a New Jersey high school wielding a baseball bat, is instructively blatant in this regard.\(^4\) Morgan

\(^4\) A threatening Joe Clark holding a baseball bat appeared on the front cover of Time (January 1988), while Stand and Deliver was reported to be President Reagan’s favorite film. (See also Andrew Britton, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” Movie, Vols. 31/32, 1985.) These films are in the tradition of the prototype school problem film: Richard Brooks’ The Blackboard Jungle, 1955. (To Sir with Love was the British remake.) The Blackboard Jungle was a graphic depiction of the growing juvenile delinquency problem in the ’50s. It was censored in several states and so to stop the uproar a disclaimer was attached to the beginning of the film stating that America had a sound school system, but it was necessary to make the public aware of the rising concern over juvenile delinquency. The spoof of such films was Teachers (Arthur Hiller, 1984).
Jagodzinski

Freeman, as Joe Clark, popularized the New Right’s ideal of a black American getting tough with other black Americans: the vigilante administrator who took matters into his own hands. There is a remarkable contrast made between the good old days and the bad new days of East Side High School in Paterson, New Jersey at the very beginning of the film. Kids are seated in rows, competing in spelling-bees, desperately and enthusiastically waving their hands because they want to give the answer and be recognized by the teacher. Morgan Freeman is presented as a young enthusiastic civil rights teacher, firing up his kids to the “grungy-looking” virtues of American democracy and its dream for equality and imagination of what schools were like then and now. New Right Boomer nostalgia covers up the memory of sex, drugs, and rock & roll with abstinence, coca-cola, and golden oldies, and then says that these have been replaced by AIDS, crack, punk and Rap.

The adult Boomer disciplinary gaze through the teenage film pic is cast in yet two other ways. First, is the accusation that general social apathy and boredom are attributed to the spoils of a middle-or-upper class. The classic example here is Bret Easton Ellis’s Less than Zero (1985), a story about the apathy of upper-class Los Angeles youth. The division between absent adults and affectless youths is repeated here. Besides the failure of the family, the abuse of class power is an attributing cause. Rich kids in this scenario have been “spoil rotten.” They have too much money and free time which is spent in the fast lane (i.e., drugs, sex, and fast cars). Julian (Robert Downey, Jr.) requires excesses of excitement (through drugs) before he can “feel” anything. Second is the redeeming idea that despite the worst depravities kids can commit, there is always hope, and such hope is always presented as a heroic struggle. Thus, in The Basketball Diaries (Scott Kalvert, 1994), Oscar, (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), who is totally heroin dependent, pulls himself out of the gutter and becomes a New York “confessory” poet. In The Thing Called Love (Peter Bogdanovich, 1994), which has the additional distinction of featuring the James Dean look-alike River Phoenix who died of a drug overdose (confirming the living fast and dying young scenario), Miranda (Samantha Mathis) must learn that to make it in Nashville as a singer, she requires perseverance and personal heartache before her songs can “mean” anything (i.e., sound “authentic” and “from the heart”). This is not unlike Ben Stiller’s Reality Bites (1993) which tells the X Generation that it’s a tough world out there so they had better start their jobs wherever and whenever they can despite their (over) qualifications.42

Family “Matters”

New Right Boomers highly overestimate the traditional nuclear family. Its ideal representation in the “golden days” of Boomer television (e.g., The Andy Griffith Show and Happy Days) make the recent filmic spoof of ’70s television series, The Partridge Family (Betty Thomas, 1994), so ridiculously funny, while schmaltzy celebrations of the family in films like A Dog Called Beethoven (Brian Levant, 1992) make it appear “funnily” ridiculous. In the New Right’s search for a nostalgia of authority, many teen films attempt to make teenage anomie a result of a dysfunctional family (i.e., the presence of a weak or absent father and a working and, therefore uncaring mother).43 The quintessential movie in this regard has been Tim Hunter’s River’s

42 During the International Youth Year 1980, the General Conference of UNESCO in Belgrade produced a comprehensive report entitled, Youth in the 1980s, which characterized the coming decade as one that was going to be one of scarcity, unemployment, underemployment, ill-employment, anxiety, defensive ness, pragmatism, and even subsistence and survival. In Charles Acland, p. 3.

43 This is brilliantly developed by Vivian Sobchack, “Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange.” In Close Encounters: Film, Feminism and Science Fiction. Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom, eds. (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 3-30. Sobchack shows how the embattled bourgeois nuclear family has been portrayed by the coming together of the science fiction, horror, and family melodramas genres during the ’80s and early ’90s. These three genres attempt to restore the family by working out in a conservative fashion the narrative resolution to the contemporary weakening of patriarchal authority, and the glaring contradictions which exist between the mythology of the family relations and their actual social practice.
Edge (1987) which represents the spectacle of wasted youth and youth gone wild. The story is loosely based on a murder that took place in Milpitas, California in 1981. It tells the story of a young man (Samson) who strangles his girlfriend (Jamie) for no apparent reason. He then invites his friends to view her naked body which he has necrophilically violated. The teenagers react in a confused and emotionless manner. No one reports the killing to the police; they do not seem to be able to grasp the tragedy of their friend’s death, nor the reprehensibility of the murder. The story raises the question how such anesthetization is possible. These deadened and apathetic youths, like the girl’s body by the river’s edge, are like the “living dead.” In a Lacanian psychoanalytic sense, they are in need of a “second death.” The film presents the teenager as someone who demands a proper burial for, as they are, they cannot find a proper place in the symbolic order. In other words the “living dead youth” insist that something be done, otherwise they will continue to “haunt” adults. Throughout the film teenage dysfunctionality is attributed to parental neglect. The traditional family has been carved. It is the parents who have put their children in this living hell by shirking their responsibility. Youth and adults live in separate worlds. The adults in River’s Edge exist in exclusively closed locations. Mothers are presented as disembodied voices, or always leaving for work with no time to interact with their children; fathers are non-existent, or as step-dads they don’t

care; or they sit alone in the dark watching TV, oblivious to their kids’ coming and goings.

Mother bashing is particularly prevalent in Boomer moralizing films. Variations of Kramer vs. Kramer are continually played over and over again with the male parent often exempt from any wrong doing. In one of the latest remakes, it is Robin Williams who is able to be the better “mom.” In Mrs. Doubtfire (Chris Columbus, 1994) it is the wife who has neglected the kids because of her position as an executive in a design firm, yet the courts have awarded her custody of the children. The father is presented as “just wanting to have fun,” a big kid at heart. In perhaps the most hyperbolic form possible of parent bashing, Home Alone (Chris Columbus, 1990) presents viewers with the ridiculous scenario that parents had actually forgotten one of their children in the rush and confusion to visit relatives in another state. Such neglect points to actual cases where single working class moms have left their two year olds at home alone because they could not afford baby sitters. The question is not one of neglect, as much as it is one that is due to a desperate economic situation. The solution to the troubled household Sobchack argues, was provided by Spielberg’s E.T. (1982): an extraterrestrial became a surrogate dad—a transported and transformed father and friend to children of single parent households: the culturally-embraced phrase, “E.T. phone home” held a deep resonance for a patriarchy in distress.

Girlie Culture

To come back full circle, Tank Girl is an especially

The idea of Lacan’s notion of a “second death” can be found in Slavoj Zizek’s Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: the MIT Press, 1991), pp. 22-23. The film is scattered with the symbolism of the “living dead” and “lifeless women,” pushing it in the direction of the horror genre. Besides the dead body of Jamie, there is Tim’s “killing” of his sister’s doll by dropping it into the river from a bridge, and the “killing” of Ellie, Feck’s “girlfriend,” a blow-up sex doll at the end of the film.

45 What is rare is to attribute teenage anomie and evilness to some genetic defect (e.g., The Good Son [Joseph Rubin, 1993] starring Macaulay Culkin as Henry Evans, or Mickey [Dennis Dimster-Denk, 1992]) because it subverts the cultural faith in the inherent goodness of the child. More prevalent are possession films where the child is an empty vessel for the entry of evil (e.g., Richard Donner’s Omen, 1976; The Lost Boys, Joel Schumacher, 1987). A film like Junior (Dennis Dugan, 1990) makes more of the prank tendencies of childhood than dwelling on inherent evilness.


47 Sobchack writes, “Physically androgynous yet paternal in function, adult, wise, and wizened, yet an innocent, childish, little ‘wise guy’; technologically and personally powerful, yet a vulnerable little victim of circumstance—E.T. physically escapes traditional patriarchal form without yielding traditional patriarchal power, and thus is able to reside in (terrestrial) domestic space and serve as Elliot’s surrogate father” (p. 20).
bothersome film for Boomer moralizers since it flies in the face of moral norms which characterize a discourse of nationalism obsessed with the rhetoric of a "national family," and the sanctity of its procreative capacities. The "motherland" collapses the home and country into a domestic theme. The metaphor of woman-as-nation presents the female personality as being chaste, dutiful and maternal.\textsuperscript{48} To produce such an image it becomes necessary to construct and promote a normative national subjectivity for young women (i.e., one of goodness and high morality). All kinds of coercive rhetorical tricks are mobilized to do this.\textsuperscript{49} Adolescent sexuality as surveyed and controlled by adult boomers is especially blind to the realities of teenage lifestyles. Sex education classes rarely discuss the dangers to adolescents caused by abusive adults. Films about teenagers written by adults such as House Party, Risky Business, Weird Science, Cooley High, rarely mention AIDs; contraceptives are almost never mentioned; pregnancy is rarely a fear; while lesbianism is virtually invisible. The main danger of sexuality emphasized in such films is the danger of being caught by adults, especially parents.\textsuperscript{50} While I am not advocating a return to some naive social realist aesthetic such exclusions need to be mentioned. Nostalgia reigns. The nostalgia for such a fictional past is projected by profamily themes of New Traditionalist advertising such as "the new morality," "the new abstinence," "the new femininity," "the new baby boom, and "the return to the good girl."\textsuperscript{51} The New Traditionalist ethos of nostalgic America directly links the idealized working mother to the idealized motherland. Good Housekeeping presented Barbara Bush as the ideal example of this New Traditionalist trend linking idealized images of women and families with patriotism and national pride. Barbara Bush is certainly not representative of the Boomer generation; however, she acts more in the capacity of a grandmother who is showing the way for Boomer stars like Sally Field and Diane Keaton who have also appeared on its cover. The nation signifies a home and its citizens as one gigantic family governed by benevolent patriarchs like the late Alan Bloom who was pessimistic about the possibility of youth ever being capable of exercising reason other than one wedded to their own self-interests.

Given this set of values the "girlie culture"\textsuperscript{52} is particularly upsetting because it also encompasses the worst nightmares of postfeminism. It presents a strata of women who are the very antithesis of patriotic idealism. In a review article on postfeminism in both American and Germanic contexts Der Spiegel\textsuperscript{53} identified these young women as "Emmas Töchter"—the daughters of emancipated woman. They are described as being strong, clever, egotistical, sensitive, self-confident, and very feminine; a good girl on the outside, but bad on the inside: "Lolitas who kick like Bruce Lee." "Not to be treated like a piece of shit," is the best advice she learnt from her mother, says Girlie-model Kate Moss. (Boys are said to be just the opposite: bad on the outside, good in the inside.) A picture in the article features a girl standing with her hand on her hips. On one side of her arm is written "witch," on the other, "slut." Emmas

\textsuperscript{48} Mother’s Day was created as a way of reuniting a divided nation after the U.S. Civil War (Thanks to an unknown reviewer for this insight!).

\textsuperscript{49} The Children’s Defense Fund collapses HIV contagion with teen pregnancy. Both are equated as being amoral sexual practices so that restraint from sexual practice is insured; both are referred to as crisis conditions and epidemics. Sexuality and homosexuality are collapsed together metaphorically and literally with illness, crime, humiliation, poverty and death. See Loraine Kenny, “The Birds and the Bees: Teen Pregnancy and the Media,” Afterimage 16, 1 (Summer 1988): 6–8. Another approach has been to use scare tactics about the risks of pregnancy and dangers of contraception in so-called abstinence-based curricula, more appropriately called “antisex curricula” by some. See Bonnie Trudell and Marianne H. Whatley, “Sex Respect: A Problematic School Sexuality Curriculum,” Journal of Sex Education and Therapy 17, no. 2 (1991): 125–140. A further tactic in many textbooks used for adolescent sex education has been to include a photograph of a pregnant teenage girl after presenting “innocent” and “playful” images of teenagers: the “before” and “after” effects if abstinence is not practiced. See Marianne H. Whatley, “Keeping Adolescents in the Picture: Construction of Adolescent Sexuality in Textbook Images and Popular Films,” in Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities, ed. Janice M. Irvine (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), pp. 183–205.

\textsuperscript{50} Whatley, p. 191.


Töchter have their own magazines (e.g., Sassy in the US, Planet Pussy in Germany); their own style of dress—"girliewear;" their own music—"Girlism;" their own stars (e.g., Madonna) and a comic, Tank Girl, (which has now been filmed). Magazines and books promote their slogans like: "Be a beast," "Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere," and "Get fit, get rich, get laid" (Madonna).

Postfeminist girls call themselves "girlies" or "babes." They are further identified as a generation 15–25 years old who demand equal wages for the same work, and believe that they have the same life chances to get ahead. They have accepted the achievements of feminism as a precondition for their own lifestyle. It is Hollywood's "Jazz Babes" who provide the "right stuff" for these girls, having made their careers from their "baby images": Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, but also Holly Golightly of Breakfast at Tiffany's, Winona Ryder and Uma Thurman. What troubles the New Right is that such characters are appearing more and more in films and in children's television. The She-Ra doll began to appear in the mid-eighties competing with Barbie, and since 1992 "girlie action figures" have been introduced in Saturday morning television programs.

If the paternal superego is breaking down and the maternal superego is becoming more prevalent, it may well be that the symbolic law of the father is being replaced by rules of knowing how to succeed. The "girlie" lifestyle embraces the Madonna ego-ideal where it becomes important to know the rules of the game: how to manipulate people and the media, and how to assume a variety of changeable roles. As another interview said, "Madonna is able to have fun, sex, million dollars, and besides this her own mind, and besides this a shaven ass..." Her "girlie" followers radically conform to her lifestyle, yet paradoxically experience themselves as outlaws and rebels.

Violence in Perspective

The filmic biography of Tina Turner is a strong reminder that, despite her success, Turner was a victim of an abusive marriage. Violence remains largely a heterosexual male problem that is intimately tied up with sexual politics, the division of labor, and the social organization of sexuality and attraction. It is time to conclude this essay by putting societal violence in perspective. In this regard, Eleanor Lyon has some remarkable observations about the content of American televised violence. The startling conclusion she makes is that there is a contradictory relationship between simulated violence on prime time television and the "real" violence on the streets, in the homes, and in the institutions. Who commits violence on television and who are its victims are in disparate discord with daily news reports. Televised violence is initiated by predominantly white, middle-class males. Lyon's study showed that those classified as violently "good" were both female and upper class while those classified as violently "bad" tended to be lower class. Lyon also found that a larger percentage of upper-class females than upper-class males were violent. The number of non-white violent was far too small to make any sort of significant assessment in this analysis, however she notes, "there was not one 'good' Latino in the sample." Victimization was equally dramatic. The data on victims revealed that women and upper-class characters were disproportionately vulnerable to violence, especially upper-class women who were predominately "good" or "innocent victims." Lower-class characters (to a lesser extent men) were

54 Ibid, p. 116. Such an ideal ego is presented by 23 year-old cover girl model, Nadja Auermann, who comes across as a dangerous "big-city" Amazon: "the bombshell next door," a complete contrast to the supermodel Claudia Schiffer who is described by one 27 year-old interviewee as someone "who looks as she has been built by a man out of a child's construction kit."

55 The programs include: X-Men (which is misnamed since the new series features four women out of the eight X-Men who are disciples of the disabled Professor Xavier), Cadillacs and Dinosaurs, Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego? and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. These shows feature buddy relationships between "girls" and the "boys"; heroes and heroines battle evil together.

56 Zizek, pp. 102–103.

57 Der Spiegel, p. 115.


59 Ibid., p.147.
more likely to be violents than victims who “deserve” violence because they were “bad.”

From this evidence Lyon draws several conclusions: First, there is a “virtual absence on television of minority members as both violents and victims” when it is well-known that “Black males have the highest victimization rates of any group. Further, the overwhelming majority of violent crimes is intraracial.” Second, there is a disproportionate representation of the upper class as victims when the majority of known victims of violent crime come from the lower classes. Third, although family violence is pervasive, rarely are there any portrayals of wife battering and child abuse. Lyon’s final concern is with the over exaggerated dangers of violence. With the exception of family violence, the televised incidents usually ended in death whereas in reality threats of physical injury are more the case. Lyon concludes with,

Upper class violents are “good” characters, lower class violents are “bad.” Lower class victims are “bad,” and are likely to be killed, while upper class people are vulnerable, but not consequentially so. Women are more likely to be victimized by violence than to commit it, but their victimization is relatively harmless. Black, Latino and other minority group members are infrequently seen in violent incidents, but are seen more frequently as violents than as victims, thus removing them from public view as among the victims deserving sympathy and support. Family violence is infrequent and, when it occurs, is relatively without impact. Finally, television violence disproportionally leads to death.

Notwithstanding the methodological problems of her study, such results do suggest a paranoia by the middle-to-upper classes towards the lower classes; a similar paranoia is targeted at pornography by the Moral Right. In other words, there is a denial and a repression of the acknowledgment that the underclasses who are unable to attain “the good life” commit most of the serious crimes in America.

Lyon’s study of simulated screen violence points to the relationship of violence and power, a couplet which is overlaid by sex, age, race, and class privilege in a capitalist society. Symbolic violence is, therefore, an incarnation of unequal social relations, an indicator of the hegemonic struggle that is in process. John Fiske has explored how the clash of these popular symbolic violent bodies (heroes, heroines, villains, victims) are an incarnation of the “real” social body—the social relations of reproduction. Such violent images can be used in constructing social identities (i.e., as if relationships in the imagination, with the potential of becoming antagonistic relationships to the social order). For example, girlie culture constructs an as if relationship against patriarchy to gain some forms of psychological empowerment (resistance), even if they are not, “in reality” empowered. Such identifications of resistance remain threatening to the dominant culture since an articulation of resentment towards the social order that oppresses them is always possible.

Any change in the reproduction of the social imaginary can, therefore, have real effects. Fiske argues that the desire for violence needs to be understood within the context of a growing gap between the privileged and the deprived which has increased since Reaganomic capitalism came into being. The axes along which violence is understood in any specific location depends on a particular combination of class, sex/gender, age, and race. Not all these vectors may apply equally. For example, with girlie culture, age and gender are of central importance. As this essay of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication which has continued its Cultural Indicators project (CI) since 1967. For a comparative analysis see George Gerbner’s “Television Violence: The Power and the Peril,” pp. 551-552.

Jagodzinski has argued, Generation X, which itself is splintered into various locations of class, race, and sex/gender, is a special focus of the New Right’s efforts to maintain and reproduce the social imaginary by delegitimating, regulating, repressing, or cajoling the youthful “bottom-up” culture. The taste for symbolic violence by Generation X culture comes from the social position they find themselves in—a subordinated position where there is a denial of the rewards (the American Dream of modernism) that the dominant rhetoric after the Second World War had promised them as their inherited right. This has resulted in a strange alliance between the capitalist commodification of youth culture and youths poaching this very commodified culture as forms of resistance for their own ends, as demonstrated, for instance, in their ‘50s antinostalgia films. The best way to reduce both physical and symbolic violence in today’s postmodern society is, therefore, not to censor it, nor to introduce more “quality” programs (ersatz for educational programs); nor is it to moralize and rail against such images, rather the best way is to change the social conditions that produce the desire for its taste. In other words, the gap of privilege has to close if violence is to decrease and the moral panic is exposed for what it hides: namely the fear that those who are now privileged may stand to lose their status. On the very day that I end this essay, French youths are violently clashing with police in the poorest districts of Paris. The government’s response has been to blame these disturbances on incoming American broadcasts of television violence. Their solution: introduce the V-chip technology into every television set in France!

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64 The refinement of such an argument can be found in the writings of Paul Willis, especially his Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) where he develops the idea of “symbolic work” as creatively expressed by today’s youth. Dick Hebdige’s Subculture: The Meaning of Style ((London: Methuen, 1979) is an early precursor of the same argument. Youth’s appropriation of material culture reveals a dramatic “refusal,” a stylized repudiation of adult culture that “in spectacular fashion (signals) the breakdown in consensus in the post-war period” (p. 17). As part of the New Left, his thesis is an obvious challenge to the Frankfurt School of cultural analysis. A similar argument can be found from a broader perspective in Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1984).

65 As reported on the CBC News, 20 February 1996.