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**DEMOCRATIC FAITH: IN SEARCH OF A MORE ACCESSIBLE  
CRITICAL PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHERS  
IN THEIR CLASSROOMS**

by

**James W. Bell**

**A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
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Doctor of Philosophy**

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**Approved by**



**Dissertation Advisor**

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APPROVAL PAGE

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This dissertation has grown out of my appreciation for the transformative potential of certain principles and constructions of critical pedagogy. Chapter One presents an overview of contemporary critical theory and charges that much of such theory remains difficult and elusive for a large portion of school teachers and even more difficult to bring to bear on their classroom practice. Education aimed at human liberation and consequent possibilities for greater social justice faces both the institutionalized constructions of alienation and the corresponding phenomena of collapsed public and democratic spheres, which underlie the hopelessness, cynicism, and despair endemic to late twentieth-century American culture.

Chapter Two focuses on analyses of these phenomena in wider American culture in the work of Eric Fromm, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Bellah, et. al. Chapter Three addresses the critiques of Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Michael Apple, who have written at length of the alienating characteristics of school experience and subsequent breakdowns in democratic possibility. Chapter Four focuses on the work of Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Roger Simon, among others, who address the possibilities of social critique and empowerment made accessible in readings of certain texts of popular culture.

Chapter Five begins with my own ideological readings of the popular film **Pump Up The Volume**, which raises a number of critical contradictory tensions in the setting of a fictional affluent secondary school. The chapter continues with an analysis of my conversations with four students in various teacher education programs at UNC-Greensboro after viewing the film. These conversations explore issues of identity, hope, the film's social vision, its political implications, and its potential usefulness as a classroom text in addressing alienation and a collapsed democratic sphere.

The last chapter includes my reflections and conclusions concerning the possibilities and limitations of using popular film texts in making certain issues of critical theory more accessible in the practice of school teachers.

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## SILENCES

It may seem somewhat odd to begin an essay on improving the quality and processes of democratic communication and interchange with introductory remarks on silence. Silence is, however, integrally related to communication. Without it there could be no communication as there would be nothing other than a cacophony of indistinguishable sounds and noise. Saussure, the early twentieth century linguist-philosopher, has attributed the understandable meanings of language to the ways in which speech is interconnected by particular constructions and qualities of silence. It is the silences within language expression, he argues, which provides language with the capacity to be understood. Saussurian linguistics do not merely describe the dynamics of meaning through speech production, but also have significant sociological and philosophical implications concerning the ways in which meanings are produced, expressed, and interpreted.

One of the most significant implications of post-Saussurian linguistic analysis is a particular valuing of those things which are not stated, which remain unexpressed, and which remain silent in any particular text. For Saussure every linguistic expression is necessarily supported and made meaningful by certain corresponding meanings which are silent, omitted, or repressed. By uttering the word "white" we come to understand that word partly through the omission of the word "black." Although unexpressed in

an explicit way, "blackness" is part of what we use to bring the notion of "whiteness" into everyday and even deeper meaning.

Although language is not the sole determinant of reality the ways in which we express certain ideas and notions have a significant and profound effect on our consciousness. By attending to the ways in which we define the limits of our discourse--in other words, what we include and exclude in our explicit communication--we can begin to understand the moral and political context into which we invite our audience and which limits the possibilities of our voice, and, even, their understanding.

As I have said, all communication is marked and made particularly meaningful due to the silences and omissions inherent in our expressions. We can, therefore, not accept a goal or challenge to destroy all silences. What I wish to suggest is that by becoming aware of the kinds and categories of the silences we do chose we can become more responsible to ourselves and our audience.

Within this work there are a number of silences which I seek to refuse as well as a number of deliberate silences which I hope to qualify and alter the quality of their silence. As you read onward I hope and expect that you will ask "Where are the voices of women in this writing?" "Why are there so few of these voices?" These omissions are deliberate. Not because I believe that women have little to offer in such discussions. On the contrary, I have not wished to succumb to a somewhat tokenistic use of women's work and voices within this writing. The film I use in Chapter Five of this work, **Pump Up The Volume**, presents a primarily masculine viewpoint

concerning the issues of education and democratic expression. This is one of the film's limitations, among a host of others, which will be discussed in due course. Indeed, this work might be successfully tackled entirely from a number of feminist perspectives, as well it should. This work I leave as a challenge to my reader and fellow educators. What I provide here is a particular set of interpretations from a limited number of theoretical perspectives.

What are some of the other conscious, and yet significant, omissions of this work? Beyond the absence of a specifically "feminist" perspective this work does not contain a particularly strong race or class analysis. It is not that such issues are unimportant. It is just that the particular lens through which I am addressing a collapsed democratic sphere as institutionalized in education is particularly an "American neo-Marxist" one. Critical theorists and educators have ground, and have a number of powerful frameworks for addressing contemporary problems of alienation and a collapsed democratic sphere. I am sure that you are aware of a number of these frameworks. I urge you to use whatever critical tools you have at hand. There is not one best method or technique for addressing and for transforming the problems we face as a global community.

Furthermore, as a reader I invite you to bring your own experiences, thinking, and skills into a conversation with this particular text. Write in the margins. Think aloud. If you are angry at what you read, or the way it is written, if you are bothered by commissions or omissions, let these be heard by someone. Dare to let

your discourse extend beyond the privacy of your own mind and thinking. Talk about it, discuss it. You may even want or need to scream it. I affirm your voice. It is a necessary voice in the world and a voice which is required in these strange experiments we call democracy--a democracy which holds out a vision and possibility for justice and freedom in ways humanity has never yet created or experienced.

I wish to make clear my understanding of this text as a beginning. In this text I am working toward expanding, informing, and expressing my own particular critical voice. The writing has been written within certain particular contexts. The successful completion of this work will serve as my doctoral dissertation. As such, this text is involved in particular power structures related to the academic community of the university. A doctorate is a notation of power and, as such, is open to certain kinds of critical scrutiny. Do I believe in what I present in this text? Yes, I stand by what I have written here. Would I have written this text if I did not "have to" for my doctoral degree? Probably not. This does not mean that what I have written is unimportant or merely some hoop I had to jump through to receive my letters. It does mean that this text is "interested." It is not value neutral nor is it some "pure" expression of critical work and reflection.

As I hope will become increasingly clear as you proceed, this text and all texts are constructed in certain value-laden contexts. This text, as with all texts, presents a particular moral and political world and provides certain positions of subjectivity, relation, and

interconnectedness between itself, or "I," and the reader, or "you." I invite you to play with the text. Bring yourself to this text, challenge this text. Realize that by meeting this text you may be in a different position than you have been before. As I invite you into a meaningful engagement with this text I hope that my writing, my work, offers you something for your own work in the world--as an educator and as a critical theorist. I will leave it up to my doctoral committee to decide if this writing offers challenges and thinking significant enough to merit a doctorate. I invite you to believe in a better world and a better way. Here is part of my journey toward such a vision and transformed reality.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A PLACE TO BEGIN: MAKING CRITICAL THEORY MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS--A CALL FOR A CRITICAL RATIONALITY

This work is addressed to education workers in the United States and abroad who are interested in the considerable body of critical theory related to education, but for whom much of this theory seems abstract and unrelated to their daily classroom practices. Critical theory is often complex, sometimes contradictory, and frequently seen as that which is "done" by "academics" at the university instead of a dynamic and accessible discourse which invites the participation and involvement of everyone connected to education. While the best of critical education theory envisages and invites an ever-expanding dialogue among all people who are, have been, or will ever be involved in educational activity--which is to say everyone--far too often the most vital subjects of such theory, students and their teachers, have a difficult time finding their way into this conversation.

This doctoral paper is directed toward understanding and developing a more critical and transformative pedagogy in public and private primary and secondary schools, especially in the United States. It is my contention that appropriating texts of popular

culture for use as subject matter of a specifically ideological nature is an important, if problematic, way of opening a more critical and relevant discourse in the pre-tertiary classroom. Texts of popular culture exist everywhere around us and are being used more frequently as general classroom resources. Although we are generally aware of the effects these texts may have on the psyche and consciousness of ourselves and our students, we seldom appropriate such texts for a more critical understanding of our world and the dynamics which are potentially and presentedly reflected and activated through such texts. By "texts of popular culture" I am speaking of the great variety of modes of discourse in which we are culturally and socially inscribed and which are available to and consumed by large segments of the general population. This is an extraordinarily immense category and might include, among other things: offerings on both pay and commercial television, including television news, commercials, sitcoms, music videos, dramas, soap operas, religious, children's and sports programming; as well as expressions of the popular press not limited to newspapers, news magazines, sports, style, and specialty magazines, and other print material for general popular consumption.

For this paper I am specifically interested in the ways in which contemporary films for popular release in the United States might be used to instruct and activate a more critical consciousness and dialogue for pre-tertiary teachers and their students. Such film texts have a wide and general appeal and, as I will explore more extensively, are an integral part of what 1990's schoolchildren relate

to as "literature." We must interpret popular film as literature, in any event, because within such cultural expressions we can "read" the ways in which different parts of our lived experiences are verbalized, described, and presented. And from such readings we can begin to interpret many of the ways in which reality and experience are represented, especially in terms of their moral and ethical and political content. Such readings and interpretations are essential, however insufficient, for a better informed and more responsible citizenry. Critical readings and programs of interpretation are necessary and can direct schoolroom activities toward a more critical pedagogy.

My work is primarily in the field of education and, as such, this essay is addressed primarily to people who are working in schools as educators and who are committed to developing and enriching their own critical awareness of the ways in which contemporary cultural dynamics encourage or limit liberational educational practice. The issues of this essay, however, must not be seen as isolated to an audience of education professionals, as these issues have an impact upon each member of our global community. It is my intention that anyone who pursues this writing will become more involved in addressing the contradictions of their own being and action in the world, their "selfhood" perhaps, as such being and action are related to the world that they ideally envision. Further, it is my intention that this writing will lead toward an active understanding of some of the processes which stand in the way of the creation of such a world.

As I address issues and phenomena of alienation in our wider culture (Chapter Two) and in our schools (Chapter Three) I wish to make clear that my own pedagogical goals are much less related to complex theoretical notions than to the kind of democratic socialism described by the Polish philosopher Lesjek Kilakowski:

Democratic Socialism requires, in addition to commitment to a number of basic values, hard knowledge and rational calculation . . . . It is an obstinant will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering, oppression, hunger, wars, racial and national hatred, insatiable greed and vindictive envy (Stiener, 1992, 20)

Toward such democratic activity social critique and critical thinking are absolutely crucial in the realization of any such inch by inch erosion of oppressive conditions. And, as expressions of popular culture are part of the dynamic of our contemporary understanding of reality, expressions of popular culture must be critically evaluated and fathomed in relation to goals of social justice. Initially we must turn to a statement concerning the conceptual and contextual boundaries of the notion "critical theory."

### **A Brief Introduction To Critical Theory**

The following is intended as a general introduction and contextualisation of the strong and growing body of theoretical work written for the field of education which falls under the category of "critical theory." Critical theory is related to and arises from the

conflict theories associated with the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, modern feminist traditions, and a growing community of liberation theologians, among others. Critical and conflict theories make up part of the field of sociology of education, which is primarily interested in issues of social justice and injustice, of oppression and liberation. These theories, while working within particular contexts and toward differing yet related goals, are marked by a number of similarities.

First, they reject the biological and technological metaphors used in many other practices of sociology, especially functionalist brands of sociology. Second, they view modern industrial society not as a stable realm of interactions, but rather as an unstable and interactive world in which meanings, knowledge and processes of human activity are constantly contested, changing, and evolving. Third, conflict and critical theorists attribute changes in the social realm to the results which occur as some group or groups of a society are in conflict with another group or groups. And fourth, conflict theorists hold that social arrangements do not serve the interests of all members of society, as a number of functionalist approaches suggest; rather, they hold that social arrangements are constructed in ways which serve the interests of particular groups within that society.

Sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf suggests four components of conflict theory which, in turn, show ways in which conflict theory has distinct advantages as a way of understanding social phenomena.

- 1) Every society is subject at every moment to change.
  - 2) Every society experiences social conflict at every moment.
  - 3) Every element in a society contributes to its change.
  - 4) Every society rests not so much on cooperation as on constraint of some of its members.
- (Dahrendorf; 29)

Component one, that every society is subject at every moment to change, presents a dynamic view of society which refuses to succumb to the kinds of fatalistic and determinist approaches which lead to acceptance of such notions as "the poor will always be with us" or "schools will always have their failures." Groups like "the poor" or "failures" cannot be seen as static populations with set places in a human tableau. The understanding that every member of society is subject to change at every moment positions every person in dynamic association with other members of their culture.

Component two, which asserts that social conflict is part of all human and social experience, replaces how we understand conflict in our world. From such a position we are no longer required to question whether social conflict is some good or bad part of our human experience which we might either promote or eliminate. Instead, conflict is what we are about as human societies and, instead of attempting to avoid conflict, we will be better involved in investigating and understanding how different kinds of conflict have different bearings on our lives.

Component three, that every element in a society contributes to particular changes within that society, demands that we hold all

members of a society responsible for the lived reality of that society. Such an attitude places an enormous burden on processes of democratic activity within that society and, at the same time, demands that we understand that within any society power relations are never final, never absolute, and are always in some important ways shared by all members of that society. Furthermore, the understanding that every element in a society is contributing to its change demands that we reject despair: as pivotal actors in our world we must all be seen as continually "making a difference" in our world.

The fourth component, that every society operates in ways which constrain some of its members, necessitates that we view society as a moral world in which some members benefit in their lives at the expense of other members. Such a position demands that we forthrightly attend to the ways in which societies treat different members of their societies as well as investigate and challenge the ways in which difference is defined and positioned within that society. By attending to the constraining activities of society we will become less apt to suffer unwittingly from such processes of constraint and possible oppression. Furthermore, the call to attend to ways in which members of our culture are constrained by other members encourages processes of democratic observation, debate, and action. Within such a sociological view of the world, constructions and activities of education and politics are vitally connected to how any particular social reality comes into being, as

well as to our abilities to come together more cooperatively and democratically.

Democracy is a central concern of critical and conflict theorists. From this viewpoint democracy can no longer be understood as a given process or phenomenon in which all "free" societies live but must be understood as something humans create and which takes on a myriad of qualities in different historical and economic circumstances. If there are forms of social justice, they do not simply "exist" as part of some mythic equilibrium of goodness and evil in the world. Social justice occurs only when people come together reflectively and actively toward the creation of certain moral and ethical understandings, commitments, and actualities. Far from being either determinist or "free-will" philosophers, critical theorists are as keenly interested in understanding how humans are capable of creating certain lived realities as they are in understanding the ways in which people have been "socially constructed." Such investigations are necessarily informed by an overarching affirmation that all human activity, expression, thought, and construction have moral, ethical, and political qualities, foundations, meanings, and consequences. In other words, humans live in a world of meaning and significance which is grounded in our moral and political relationships with one another.

Critical theorists are not afraid of the terms "good" and "evil" and, instead, are fundamentally interested in the ways in which humans create, promote, allow, avoid, conceptualize, express, and enact the "good" and the "evil" in their world. While these terms

may seem more appropriately relegated to church or religious life, critical theorists insist that any meaningful critique, vision and activity in the world must confront and challenge all notions and constructions of good and evil, for the pivotal reason that all good and evil are human constructions--practices which have occurred and occur from different historical contexts and specific enactments of power relations in the world.

As a starting point, good and evil in our society must be seen as what occurs from the ways in which power relations are structured and in relationship to the material and social resources of our world. Critical theorists are much less interested in specific national interests, as in Georgian interests versus Russian interests or United States interests versus Japanese interests than in how such conflicts impact the quality of human life on a global scale and within a global perspective. Interest can no longer be centered on short-sighted and exclusionary questions like: "How might Americans better compete in the global village due to enhanced policies and procedures in the realm of public education?" Such limited concerns only serve to perpetuate a world in which the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished continues to expand while fewer and fewer live well at the expense of the ever-expanding majority. A more relevant question, perhaps, for critical theorists is: "How might we, as members of an extraordinarily complex and diverse world community, reduce the amount of unnecessary human suffering and afford more people positions and activities of increasing human

dignity and respect and inherent worth and move toward a radically more responsible and democratic world community?"

Because of morally and politically charged questions they ask, as well as because of the particular stand they take in relation to such questions, critical theorists can be described in the extreme as necessarily anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist; and their theoretical and practical work is almost always framed and guided by these contexts and concerns. As social justice is a fundamental goal of critical theorists, techniques and processes of interpretation are the necessary tools of their work. Critique and interpretation are two of the ongoing processes which keep alive the Socratic challenge that by examining our lives, our lives may well be more worth living. Critical theorists differ from the classical Greeks, however, in that critical theorists demand that all people be included in the conversations which lead to the ways in which we construct our social world. Therefore, critical theorists must be seen as radically democratic, though well aware that democracy is a problematic set of notions and practices, with a great variety of differing and contradictory meanings and expressions.

History is of particular importance to the work of critical theorists. As is the case with democracy, good or evil cannot be taken as some unproblematic essential "truth," but rather, must be seen in particular historical contexts. From such a position history becomes important as we are able understand how these stories have been constructed within particular relations of social power and serving specific interests and people. Critical theorists are

specifically interested in "social history," histories which reveal how ordinary people's lives have been shaped by the power and social relations under which these people live; whereas standard versions of history characteristically focus on the lives and exploits of predominantly rich white men and the wars by which they carved up geographic and material resources. Social history attempts to resurrect the voices of people who have been silenced and overlooked by traditional histories. Critical theorists are also keenly interested in the history of particular people's resistance to dominant processes of oppression and injustice. These histories are important because they convey a legacy of hope and activism toward a more just and equitable world order specifically and mindfully created through the actions of marginalized and dispossessed peoples. Such histories recount the ways in which different people at different times have refused and resisted their subjugation and enforced helplessness and, instead, have achieved new relations and experiences of power. By bringing silenced histories or "the history of subjugated knowledges," in Sharon Welch's terms, into our active consciousnesses we are in a much better position to begin unmasking the histories of our own oppression and oppressing. It is only by making ourselves of our particular subject positions within traditions and processes of oppressing and oppression that we might begin to act more responsibly in our particular communities and larger world.

A number of contemporary thinkers, from both the political right and the political left, criticize the work of critical theorists for being divisive, for encouraging a view of the world which encourages

and perpetuates social division. Critical theorists are certainly disrupting a host of status quo economic and political policies and procedures which maintain and institutionalize human suffering. Critical theorists, I argue, are not the ones dividing people in the world but, rather, seek to understand and recount the ways in which people have been divided, because of their gender, race, social class, sexuality, religious affiliation, nationality, age, genetic make-up and anything else which has been and is used to determine who is allowed to live "the good life" and who is kept from such a life. It must be said, however, that critical theory refuses the possibility of living a life which is somehow "value neutral." On the contrary, either a person is theoretically and actively involved in processes of social critique and social justice or they are part of the systematic, if unconscious, oppression of others or even their own selves in the world. It is important to understand that aligning ourselves with those who are actively engaged in the understandings and processes intended to reduce unnecessary human suffering does not protect us from acting in ways which unnecessarily oppress and harm other people. Our own consciously moral, ethical and political commitments are necessary and essential qualities of acting in more responsible and humane ways in the world. Such conscious commitments are, however, insufficient toward a more just and decent world. Much more is required and the way is neither essentially "set" nor programmatically devisable.

The issue of authority has become an important focus of attention for critical theorists. Because critical theorists advocate

radical democratic practices which refuse to silence any voice, the position of authority in the face of a philosophically accepted uncertainty becomes problematic. Authority must also be challenged in the ways it has been historically used as a means to silence others. In the end of his work on schooling and popular culture, **Sentimental Education**, James Donald remarks:

It always remains important to deflate claims to authority--claims to speak and, even more, claims to speak for--as they threaten to become too monological, too universalistic and so too exclusive. It is therefore especially important to heed different, marginal, abnormal and transgressive voices that question the 'we' of political dialogue and the 'I' of agency. (Donald, 1992, 178)

Critical theorists, thus, find themselves in the difficult position of authoritatively advocating principles and activities of "justice," "democracy," and "truth" while recognizing that their authority is never certain, always negotiated, and subject to clarification, challenge and change. This difficult position with respect to authority has sometimes been phrased as acting with "tentative commitment".

As I hope is becoming increasingly clear, the work of critical theorists is most often gray and murky and filled with contradictions and paradox. Each person has their own moral and political history in the world. This moral and political history will necessarily inform our own personal understanding and our relationship to moral and political thinking and action. Through the understanding and

appreciation of the strange and particular ways in which people come to be who they are, critical theorists steer away from formulaic solutions to problems in the schools or anywhere else and are positioned so that the stories they tell about society are more carefully informed and constructed. This reluctance to provide step-by-step formulae for addressing social problems and issues following some snapshot presentation of the issues can be maddening to those of us who long for certainty and self-assurance. Critical theorists are sympathetic and yet generally unyielding. There are few of us who do not long for a world of certain outcomes, in which we could be certain that for any input X we can expect some specific and predictable output Y. (I am aware of people in our communities who actively appreciate and encourage the complexity and unexpected quality of the outcomes of our efforts in the world, but I believe that such people are, unfortunately, in the minority--especially among educators.)

Something I argue is of central importance to the group of critical theorists with whom I share growing company, conscience, and consciousness, and which is echoed in James Donald's previous quote, is the absolute commitment that every human being is needed in the contribution toward a more just and compassionate world. This is a notion of democracy which insists that every person has some kind of a voice and that their voice is important and essential toward any transformation of the world for at least the reason that each voice has some kind of critical understanding of the world and their "real" and "true" relationship to the world. These are far

reaching commitments and ones which, I understand, deserve a more substantial and significant presentation and investigation. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is important to understand that, just as education should be a guaranteed right of every citizen of the United States, and ideally of every citizen of the world, the education of every person must be critical--which is to say that everyone has the right and responsibility to become more aware of their subject position and relation in the world toward disclosing the ways in which we are both oppressor and oppressed, both inscribed into particular discourses of our world and capable of inscribing our unique voice and understanding into the world.

Traditional investigations into the particular characteristics and expressions of democracy often challenge the processes of culture while questioning and interpreting contemporary phenomena of late twentieth century democracy. Critical theorists investigate the ways in which places of ideological struggle--schools, the workplace, prisons, hospitals, and military installations, among other sites--contribute to or limit certain expressions and activities of democracy. For this paper the school is our primary site of investigation and query.

### **Critical Theory And Education**

As I have related earlier, there exists a strong and growing body of work in critical theory. Critical theorists have been faulted, and with some justification, with presenting theory which is largely

inaccessible to "ordinary" education professionals: teachers, administrators, social workers, and specialists, among others.

H. Svi Shapiro attests to the wealth of critical literature on education which has become what Bertell Ollman calls the "left academy" and, while not criticizing these theoretical approaches for their accessibility, comments on how such theory is resisted by more dominant and typically conservative current discourses on education in America today:

The Left academy has undeniably burrowed deeply into the intellectual ramparts of the hegemonic fortress. Its intellectual critique of the institution of schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, and the hidden curriculum now constitutes a devastatingly powerful intellectual statement which denies, forcefully, the consensual version of school purposes, practices, and theories . . . . Yet, however creative, productive, and persuasive this critical tradition may be, it remains resolutely on the outside, far removed from the conventionally constituted discourse concerning the problems and issues in American education today. The intellectual and common-sense categories that comprise this discourse [of American education] serve as a powerfully resilient bulwark against change in this ideological war of position. Whatever reasons...for the failure to breach these bulwarks, they are certainly not to be found in the inappropriateness or lack of incisiveness of the critique itself . . . . Whatever might be said about its [this critical tradition's] weaknesses, limitations, contradictions as a body of theory, it must also be acknowledged that the work as a whole represents an ongoing series of statements that powerfully illuminate the realities of the social and educational crises we have witnessed during the last two decades. (Shapiro, 1990, 17-18)

Shapiro praises the power and critical vision of critical educational theory while trying to make sense of some of the reasons why such powerful and persuasive theory is not eroding the "bulwarks" of established educational formulation and practice. There is, no doubt, significant resistance to enacting theories which at their core are concerned with disrupting and counteracting the oppressive effects of contemporary educational understanding and practice. No doubt the interests of some people are served especially well by current notions and activities of educational practice. I suspect it will surprise no one that these current trends and theories best serve the interests of a privileged few while presenting a view of an "overall fairness of competition" in which those "most deserving" reap appropriate rewards. Although as Shapiro's work underscores, such notions are more and more questioned and seen as suspect by the general population, they remain the dominant ones and the ones which continue to hold sway and power over the lives of students and educators almost everywhere.

Shapiro's work **Between Capitalism and Democracy: Educational Policy and the Crisis of the Welfare State** focuses on the connection between education and the corporate hierarchy of America in addressing and exploring "the functions and dynamic of political power." While this work primarily focuses on some of the contradictory processes in formal political activity in the United States in the 1980's, Svi Shapiro is sensitized to the necessity for improving the "critical literacy" of American citizens through all viable and responsible means, especially in relation to the role that

public education might play toward this improved literacy. In the following passage Shapiro presents a context for understanding some of the ways in which critical theory makes specific demands on education and holds a specialized place for democracy within these demands. Furthermore, through this passage I believe that Shapiro makes the tacit case that a more accessible critical theory, one that is absolutely rooted in everyday classroom practice, is essential toward any transformed and liberational educational practice. Shapiro states:

[Critical theory of education] represents a significant body of theoretical work arising from, and illuminating in important ways, the practices and structures of education in the societies of what has come to be called advanced capitalism. Theoretical work here implies not detached, disinterested theory, but analysis that is both a moral and a political indictment of the dehumanizing, alienating, and authoritarian structures of contemporary schooling. It is an indictment of such incisiveness and power that it goes, in many ways, unanswered. At the same time, the theoretical work has borne little political fruit. (Shapiro, 1990, 23)

Shapiro's work shows how little of this theoretical work had reached the public discourse preceding the 1987 US. presidential election but argues that:

We have failed to incorporate new themes, moral concerns and social visions into the general discourse on education and in so doing have failed, in Gramsci's metaphor, to mark out a radically altered and expanded terrain on which to conduct our war of position and on which to struggle for a reshaping of the

hegemonic ideology which affects schooling (Shapiro, 1990, 23-24).

For Shapiro a most salient characteristic of this failure to bring critical educational theory to bear on political discourse and activity:

has been the inability or reluctance to develop a political agenda for education resonant with the cultural concerns and social needs of subordinate and intermediary groups and rooted in the critical analysis of schooling (Shapiro, 1990, 24).

We must assume that for Shapiro a "political agenda" in educational work is one based in classroom practice. It is only when the classroom becomes a politicized and democratically alive sphere of activity that any liberational educational transformation takes place. Shapiro astutely demands that such activities will address the "cultural concerns and social needs." We must be sure, however, that the expression of these concerns and needs are articulated in accessible and negotiable ways for and by the people they address.

Shapiro sees an expanded range of democratic activity and sensibility as central to a transformative educational praxis:

Our agenda will draw on democratic citizenry traditions concerning public education (idealized and residual as these may be) in the same way that our first agenda item draws on traditions of ethical community in American life--in the workplace, the community, the media, politics, the church, and in other basic social institutions. Every phase of school life--pedagogy, curriculum, institutional governance--can become a focus of demands connected to a reinvigoration of the notion of citizenship preparation. Nor should it be too difficult to

incorporate into our educational agenda themes resonant of middle-class and working-class impotence and the resulting social resentments and anxieties; among these. . . is the demand for a critical literacy attuned to the manipulative and exploitive effects of the mass media, and the erosion of political legitimacy that is exhibited in low voter turnouts. (Shapiro, 1990, 25)

While aware of the requirements of a re-enlivened critical democracy, Shapiro urges political and educational workers alike to rejoin critical inquiry with the lived experiences of our citizenry.

This paper is an attempt at developing the possibilities for a more responsible and sociologically informed critical literacy in contemporary pedagogical practice while recognizing how well we have learned not to question and not to challenge established notions and policies of educational practice. As such, this is a work focused on accessibility, specifically how popular film texts might be used in everyday critical classroom practice. Although presenting specific critiques of alienation and a corresponding collapse of the democratic sphere from the perspective of our larger social context and then from the perspective of how such alienation is perpetuated and institutionalized in schools, I will illustrate how popular film might be used to address these phenomena. First, however, I wish to lay some of the moral groundwork underpinning this work.

## **Some Specifics Of Our Present Situation And A Case For Radical Hope**

Despair? Yes, ours is a world full of despair. Institutionalized and pervasive injustice and overwhelming amounts of unnecessary human suffering in the world? Certainly. What Purpel and Shapiro insist upon, along with a growing community of critical educators, is that we neither forget nor deny our human power and ability to act in conscious and conscientious ways to transform our world into one that is much more worth living in than the present world.

I have spoken of conscience and consciousness before but I believe that Shapiro describes their difference and interrelatedness especially well. Toward a world of hope and possibility Shapiro states:

Real human progress is inseparable from social movements that are impelled by the synthesis of consciousness and conscience (perhaps the more complete, if untranslatable, meaning of Freire's "consciencization"). It is the combination of self and social understanding linked to the force of moral outrage and assertion that is the indispensable condition for making possible greater freedom and justice and more democratic, cooperative, and compassionate forms of living. An educational agenda which seeks to do more than understand the world, that has the power to reshape at least part of our reality, must effectively incorporate both forms of discourse [of both conscience and consciousness]. (Shapiro, 1990, 27)

These two together, the development of conscience and conscious awareness, are a necessary part of any critical pedagogical process.

Shapiro goes on to show the interconnectedness of these two human possibilities and their respective relation to the past (conscience) and to the present (consciousness):

It is our noble side, the side that yearns for a better world of more justice, freedom, and humanity that has been prefigured in the historical past. It offers itself to the present as a standard of critical judgment. In this sense such religious, national, and popular mythologies become a potential source of real ideological weight in the ebb and flow of public debate and political discourse. While this provides the basis for the morally affirmative vision of our educational agenda, the latter--consciousness derived from the practical transformation of reality--is attuned to a critical awareness of the present reality. It incorporates into our agenda the deprivations and frustrations experienced by men and women in our culture and mediated through educational concerns and issues. One of these without the other will not do. Ethical admonitions and idealizations without critical apprehension of our real existing lives leads to an empty moralism; analytical insights, however penetrating, without the force of morally inspired demands leads to a sterile scientism. (Shapiro, 1990, 27)

So, from the outset we must refuse the cynicism and hopelessness so endemic to our late twentieth century ways of understanding and being in the world. Further, the dual processes of conscience development and conscious awareness must guide all critically transformative pedagogical activity. These positions are essential to the development of a critical literacy. Another element crucial to critical literacy is what Purpel calls "critical judgment":

Criticism as judgment refers to the application of moral and esthetic criteria to propositions, policies, events, and other phenomena . . . . Criticism in this sense attempts to size up the

quality of relationships between a set of prior standards and some specific and concrete phenomenon . . . . Criticism also involves us in combining rigor with judgment, in attempting to integrate careful thinking with our moral and esthetic principles. This is another way of characterizing a major essence of our educational vision in which we utilize our intellectual skills to create and make manifest that vision. (Purpel, 1989, 131)

The end of critical inquiry is the continual realization and development of certain conscientiously constructed visions of a more just and caring world. There are certain necessary components in this process which might be rather simply, if demandingly, phrased by a number of critical theorists as "infinite hope in the face of absolute suspicion."

### **Structure Of This Essay**

This essay on evolving a more accessible critical pedagogy is structured in the following ways. Chapter Two presents the particular forms of alienation contribute to a collapsed democratic and public sphere as developed in the writing of Eric Fromm, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Bellah, et al.

Chapter Three addresses the ways in which these particular forms of alienation have been institutionalized in contemporary classroom practice. Paolo Freire, Ira Shor, and Michael Apple have addressed at length the characteristics of alienation in school experience and the subsequent and associated breakdowns in

democratic possibility. What is more, their work is grounded in what I have come to call "democratic faith," which enjoins all the members of educational communities in particular thinking and practice which seeks to eradicate experiences of alienation in school communities and beyond.

From this foundation Chapter Four presents some of the theoretical work which underpins my assertion that certain texts of popular culture, and specifically popular film texts, can be used to investigate and even destabilize experiences of alienation and social helplessness and might, therefore be used to enhance critical literacy. In this chapter I rely on readings and interpretations of work by Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, Roger Simon and Paul Smith, among others.

Chapter Five presents a critical reading of the popular film text **Pump Up the Volume** from my own personal and professional perspective, and as informed by the theoretical grounding presented in the previous chapters, as well as from the perspectives of four student educators. Throughout this chapter special attention is given to the contradictory ideological and discursive spaces identified within the film text. A specific intention of the Part One of this chapter is the presentation of a particular ideological reading of a film text so that teacher educators might have an example from which to develop their own ideological readings of this and other film texts. Part Two of this chapter is based on a conversation between four students in various teacher education programs at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and myself after an

informal viewing of the film. This conversation is grounded in questions concerning alienation, personal identity, hope, and possibility, the political and ethical positions of the film as well as the potential usefulness of the film as a classroom text.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, includes my reflections and conclusions concerning the possibilities and limitations of using a popular film text as a critical tool in everyday classroom practice for both teacher educators and their students.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ALIENATION AND A COLLAPSED DEMOCRATIC SPHERE

Of all the problems facing democratic societies one of the most profound is the process by which citizens learn to avoid the very processes which might lead to a more just and equitable living in the world. I am talking about the ways in which people in democratic societies are systematically involved in the kind of silences which erode and undercut democratic thinking and activity.

Alienation has been the subject--either specifically or subsidiarily--of sociological and psychological critique for much of the past two centuries, as people have been writing on the "human condition." The period since the advent of the industrial revolution and modernity has emphasized scientific rationality, efficiency, and ever-expanding bureaucracies with the promises and offers of higher standards of living, longer life expectancies and startling levels of consumer wealth and increased leisure. With the advent and growth of this charted course and drive toward this peculiarly modern "wealth" have emerged particular forms of alienation and anomie which are marked by people's growing inability to come together as a democratic citizenry to address the essential problems of our living in the world together.

In observing the growth of democracy in early nineteenth century America, Alexis de Toqueville described the emergence of a new way of social being he called "individualism." He writes:

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself [sic] from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (Toqueville in Bellah, 1985, 37)

An understanding of this particular form of alienation, and its subsequent development over the past one hundred and seventy-five years, is crucial in coming to an understanding of the current crises in democracy and how these crises affect and are affected by current processes of pedagogical activity.

The present flowering of what Toqueville called "individualism" is an alienation which separates us first from our larger global and local communities, then from the particular "families" and circles of acquaintance to which we learn to retreat, and finally from ourselves and our ability to be involved in creating meaningful and responsible living realities through our social interactions. Further, we will see that such alienation must be seen and understood as a peculiarly middle-class phenomenon marked by the new kinds of wealth which has its roots in the Industrial Revolution and European Enlightenment thinking.

Toqueville describes the particular subject position of the democratic individual with an almost uncanny anticipation of what

has become the lived reality of 1990's Americans. Reflecting upon 1810's Americans he writes:

There are more and more people who though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man [sic] anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habits of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands . . . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart, (Bellah, 1985, 37)

This passage not only contains a description of the goals of autonomy and "self-reliance" which have become the liturgical credo of late twentieth century Americanism but also describes the horrific and almost certain outcome of the realization of such a social and personal philosophy.

In the early development of United States America the primacy of the individual was thought to best benefit the goals of a just society. Within the concept of utilitarian individualism is the understanding that in a society in which each person is encouraged and freed to pursue their own economic and social self-interest the general good of the larger community will also be maximized (Bellah, 1985, 33). In many of the sayings from Ben Franklin's **Poor Richard's Almanac** we hear the conditions and goals of such individualism. There is almost a numbing recognition of these mainstream sayings: "Early to bed and early to rise

Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." "God helps those who help themselves." "Plough deep while sluggards sleep, and you shall have corn to sell and to keep..." These social directives emphasize self-reliance and hard work as requisites for successful living, but overlook the cultural cohesion and cooperation which have laid the way for such individual pursuit. Such individualist notions lead to the assumption that victims of poverty or hard times have only themselves to blame, because they suggest that in a world in which we are all "free" to create our own realities, the particular conditions of our lives are what we merit and deserve.

Bellah et. al. describe another strand of individualism noted in the first line of Walt Whitman's **Song Of Myself**, in contrasting the hard work and personal industry required by democratic individualism with the psychological and aesthetic notion of "expressive individualism (Bellah, 1985, 33)." "I celebrate myself" is Whitman's opening line, and with it he lets us know that the freedom to express himself, the freedom to express ourselves, is the central possibility offered in the American way of life.

While recognizing the importance of these two strands as part of an American character, the Bellah team identify two different and contrasting strands in the development of such a character. The "biblical strand" can be characterized by the Puritan governor John Winthrop, whose criteria of success was not individual wealth and security but rather the formation of a community in which a particular moral and ethical vision might be pursued in common by the community members (Bellah, 1985, 29). The Puritans of

Massachusetts represent a single example of a number of groups for whom a morally committed community is a paramount goal. Penn and the Quakers formed Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love." Moravian, Shaker and Amish groups have, likewise, worked toward the creation of their own utopian societies on earth and further exemplify this biblical configuration of a notion of individualism based on communal responsibility.

Freedom in this sense is necessarily defined in radically different ways from that proffered by individualist notions. Winthrop describes such freedom "in reference to the covenant between God and man [sic] (Bellah, 1985, 29)." Further, such freedom is constrained by activities and goals which are carefully understood and respected "to that only which is good, just and honest (Bellah, 1985, 29)." Any activity which does not meet the criteria of goodness, justice and honesty cannot be permitted if the society is to maintain its covenant with a responsibly constructed ethical vision.

Another strand of the American character relating personal freedom to responsibilities of the individual to the community has been described in some of the writings of Thomas Jefferson whose vision of a democratic republic depends on the involvement of citizens actively creating and recreating the republic. Jefferson argues that: "The further the departure from direct and constant control by the citizens the less has the government the ingredients of the republic (Bellah, 1985, 30)." Jefferson urged every republican to "Love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself (Bellah, 1985, 31)" because he believed that a successful

democracy depends upon people acting responsibly and generously for that democracy.

The requirements and conditions of human freedom as seen through the lens of ethical and republican notions of society are great and are grounded in a particular understanding of democracy. In the article "Moral Education and the Democratic Ideal" Scheffler describes a particular dynamic of democracy:

The democratic ideal is that of an open and dynamic society: open in that there is no antecedent social blueprint which is itself to be taken as dogma immune to critical evaluation in the public forum; dynamic, in that its fundamental institutions exposing it to public scrutiny and resting it ultimately upon the choices of its members . . . . It envisions rather a society that sustains itself not by the indoctrination of myth, but by the scrutiny both of our and its alternatives. Choice of the democratic ideal will be sustained and strengthened by critical and responsible inquiry into the truth about social matters. The democratic faith consists not in a dogma, but in a reasonable trust unfettered inquiry and free choice will themselves be chosen, and chosen again, by free and informed men [sic]. (Schleffler, 331)

Such a democracy has as a central premise the active challenge that humans are capable of the critical thinking and moral integrity in action which will lead to both an understanding of "the truth of social issues" as well as the commitment to act politically with other citizens of such a republic to bring about the kinds of justice these truths will necessarily demand.

The very maintenance of this freedom to question, critique and create social reality is dependent upon a politically aware and

activated citizenry--a citizenry who are involved in a dynamic process of education. Such an education is necessarily aimed at a growing awareness of the material conditions of our global community and is intimately interwoven with particular moral and ethical commitments to a vision and growing reality of justice and responsibility in our world. Such educational understanding and activity is the larger agenda for my work in critical inquiry and the schools and will be explored alongside the more common manifestations of schooling in 1990's America.

In this chapter and throughout this paper I am primarily concerned with the particular kinds of alienation which limit and contradict the critical and participatory democracy which has been described by Scheffler. Such forms of alienation are endemic to late modern industrialized nations and contribute to a collapsed and vacuous democratic sphere. Further, these forms of alienation are so commonly experienced as to be taken for granted as part of the "natural order" of things instead of being recognized as social and institutional constructions, constructions which function as the foundation for much of the hopelessness, cynicism and despair which walls us from the kind of world we might more freely envision and choose.

Manifestations of the kinds of democratic individualism described by Toqueville are hardly bound by cultural and class distinctions. Further, the kind of democratic republic described by Scheffler which refuses to equate society with the market but instead affirms society as community seems further and further

from view. Where is the society which demands social justice and the kind of responsible engagement and activation of freedom which leads to undoing much of the unnecessary human suffering in our world? I am afraid that such a society is not close at hand. And, yet, neither is such a society impossible nor beyond the possibilities of our creative and communal abilities.

The issues facing us are immense and often it is simpler to feel and be overwhelmed by the challenges in front of us than to actually do anything about them. Often we turn to popular presentations of our world in retreat from such challenges. That images of popular culture have such a dulling quality makes them especially important in our considerations of the mechanisms which lead to our retreat from redressing suffering and oppression which are alarmingly unnecessary and avoidable. Kilakowski and Scheffler, among other advocates of democracy, hold that only through responsible reason and reflection, informed both by a growing and reliable information base and a set of basic moral commitments, may we create a decent and just world. Democracy, as we can understand it in contemporary practice, is not in a very good position to meet the moral and ethical challenges against which we might set it. And although the past several years have marked a significant move away from totalitarian regimes we should not understand such political and economic developments as movements which are primarily motivated by and toward increased democratic activity, as much of the popular press and political rhetoric would have us believe. Such shifts in global orientation might well have to do less with a justice-based

democracy than with an urge toward greater material and physical security.

George Stiner offers this encapsulated insight into recent shifts in political and economic orientations in the 1990's:

The millions who poured westward through the broken Berlin Wall . . . are not inebriated with some abstract passion for freedom, for social justice, for the flowering of culture. It is a TV-revolution we are witnessing, a rush toward the 'California-promise' that America has offered to the common man [sic] on this tired earth. American standards of dress, nourishment, locomotion, entertainment, housing are already the concrete utopia in revolutions. With *Dallas* being viewed east of the Wall, the dismemberment of the regime may have become inevitable. (Stiner in Kerr, 25)

Stiner has not only updated Toqueville's description of the personal comfort and security driven individual in accordance with what Fromm calls our present "market character," but has also implicated elements of video mass audience popular culture in the disintegration of democracy as a necessary context for social justice. This passage also makes clear the importance of addressing issues of popular culture as they influence social justice through democratic activity.

Before such an examination and evaluation can occur we must provide a more comprehensive context for the kinds of alienation which preclude our relation to the world of public discourse and activity. Following are explorations of three constructions of what is frequently referred to as our contemporary "alienation problem."

Eric Fromm's work focuses on a psychological and religious reading of Karl Marx's notion of alienation as the "having mode of existence." Central to this work is Fromm's notion of the "marketing character." Christopher Lasch has used the notion of "narcissism" to describe a fundamental characterizing quality of the alienated person most common to late twentieth century advanced industrial societies. For Lasch, this person is one whose experience of the world is so siege-like that relevant and substantive social interaction has become impossible. The work of Robert Bellah et al. in **Habits of the Heart** explores the kind of alienation against which Toqueville warned over one hundred years ago. From this work the very complex and contradictory nature of current patterns of alienation is explored to try to understand how it is that social discourse and democratic activity are endangered in democratic societies. This chapter concludes with a formulation of the work and challenges which this paper sets out to address.

### **Eric Fromm And The Alienated Marketing Character**

Eric Fromm has been an apologist for the work and philosophy of Karl Marx for specifically American readers since the Cold War has made "socialism" a dirty word in the American vocabulary. For Fromm, Marx's notion of alienation is foundational for understanding the human character of late industrial capitalist societies. Fromm tells us that for Marx,

Alienation (or "estrangement") means...that man [sic] does not experience himself as the acting agent in the grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object. (Fromm, 1961, 44)

For Fromm, as well as for Marx, the essence of alienation is the worship of "idols" which humans have created themselves. These "idols" may be material or ideological but are essentially the objectified chrysalis of human creative activity. The idol may be some god-like thing, an idea or concept, the state, the church, possessions, art or a person, anything to which a person submits themselves as inferior and disempowered.

For Marx, the idol-worshipping person becomes transformed into a thing who only achieves existence in relation to that which has been created and then worshipped. This might well stand as a simplified definition of the Marxian notion of "reification." Reification destroys our intersubjective relationship with those things and ideas humans have created. The Latin root of the verb "reify" is *res* which means "thing" or "object." When we give human creations a life of their own, separated and at distance from ourselves, those things are no longer in a position to inform us and interact with the ways we understand the world. As the creation is objectified and then idolized, or reified, the person is diminished in ability to be anything other than some incomplete reflection of the

object and is no longer in touch with himself as the creative and creating person. Fromm tells us that such a person "has become estranged from his [sic] own life forces, from the wealth of his own potentialities, and is in touch with himself only in the indirect way of life frozen in the idols (Fromm, 1961, 44)."

The implications of such alienation are immense and reach into the possibilities humans have of coming together as citizens to create the world they might most reasonably and conscientiously purpose. Fromm quotes Marx:

A direct consequence of the alienation of man [sic] from the product of his labor, from his life activity and from his species life is that man is alienated from other men. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men. What is true of man's relationship to his work, to the product of his work and to himself, is also true of his relationship to other men, to their labor and to the object of their labor. In general, the statement that man is alienated from his species life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life. (Fromm, 1961, 53)

The processes of alienation, Fromm argues, are what tear us away from ourselves, our creative activity and our ability to come together in meaningful ways with other people. And it is this estrangement from other humans which separates us from ethical democratic activity. It is worth noting that in this formulation of alienation it is a human's inability to "confront" their own self that separates them from all others. It is important for us to ponder what Marx and Fromm mean by confronting ourselves and others.

In the processes of alienation of which Fromm writes, the world and society no longer exist as rich and diverse multi-textured wholes. Each sphere of life can be and is separated from the other. For example we might think of a car factory. Separation of the spheres of our larger social life might be understood much in the way that the assembly line separates and divides the elements of production of a car, so that upon witnessing any particular moment in the production process the worker who creates and places the manifold, and that part itself, appear to have little if anything in common with the worker who places the windshield and that part. We all know, however, that a windshield without a manifold does not make a very successful automobile. The separations which occur in our ethical and political world are not always so obvious. Fromm continues in conversation with Marx:

Alienation leads to the perversion of all values. By making economy and its values--"gain, work, thrift, and sobriety"--the supreme aim of life, man [sic] fails to develop the truly moral values, "the riches of a good conscience, of virtue, etc., but how can I be virtuous if I am not alive, and how can I have a good conscience if I am not aware of anything?" In a state of alienation each sphere of life, the economic and the moral, is independent of the other, "each is concentrated on a specific area of alienated activity and is alienated from the other."  
(Fromm, 1961, 54)

Democracy is not possible under the specter of such constructed divisions because it is fundamentally not a product or outcome, but rather a dynamic and ongoing process related to the whole human

phenomena and experience. Democracy is an ethical activity of full-sighted reason, discernment and responsive creativity and, as such, becomes impossible in a climate of intellectual, rational and practical atomization and separation of disciplines. Such a climate, however, has become a seemingly inescapable quality of advanced capitalist societies.

Fromm is insistent on making his reader aware of the ways in which alienation is related to particular modes of a capitalist consumer economy and how such an economy is implicated in creating false and destructive needs in its citizenry. Fromm presents Marx's critique of needs in the world of capitalism from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

In the alienated world of capitalism needs are not expressions of man's [sic] latent powers, that is , they are not human needs; in capitalism "every man speculates upon creating a new need in another in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin. Everyone tries to establish over others an alien power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egoistic need. With the mass of objects, therefore, there also increases the realm of alien entities to which man is subjected . . . . Man becomes increasingly poor as a man; he has increasing need of money in order to take hostage of the hostile being . . . . The need for money is therefore the real need created by the modern economy, and the only need which it creates. The quantity of money becomes increasingly its only important quality. Just as it reduces every entity to its abstraction, so it reduces itself in its own development to a quantitative entity. Excess and immoderation become its true standard. This is shown subjectively, partly in the fact that the expansion of production and of needs becomes an ingenious and always calculating subservience to inhuman, depraved unnatural, and imaginary

appetites. Private property does not know how to change crude need into human need; its idealism is fantasy, caprice and fancy. (Fromm, 1961, 54-55)

This need for creation precludes moral responsibility and replaces it with an ethic of endless and mind-dulling commodity consumption. The implications of this perpetual creation of false needs on our being human in the world are enormous. Fromm warns and again quotes Marx:

The man [sic] who has thus become subject to his alienated needs is "a mentally and physically dehumanized being...the self-conscious and self-acting commodity." This commodity-man knows only one way of relating himself to the world outside, by having it and by consuming (using) it. The more alienated he is, the more the sense of having and using constitutes his relationship to the world. "The less you are the less you express your life, the more you have, the greater is your alienated life and the greater is the saving of your alienated being." (Fromm, 1961, 56)

Fromm tells us that the more a person become a consumer of commodities the less capable that person is of acting humanely since the appetitive processes of consuming useless things keep us from being anything greater than a consumer.

In the 1976 work **To Have Or To Be?** Eric Fromm confronts us with the problems of the bipart ethos of late twentieth-century capitalism, radical hedonism and unlimited egotism. For Fromm radical hedonism means "that the aim of life is happiness, that is, maximum pleasure, defined as the satisfaction of any desire or

subjective need a person may feel (Fromm, 1976, xxv)." Fromm describes unlimited egotism as the belief "that egotism, selfishness, and greed, as the system needs to generate them in order to function, lead to harmony and peace (Fromm, 1976, xxv)." Both of these notions have significant histories but it was not until the late eighteenth century that these ideas became the growing ethos of the bourgeoisie and foundational to the growing cult of unrestrained individualism.

Fromm rejects both of these ethical formations on both theoretical and practical grounds, although he acknowledges that they stand as guiding and remarkably potent standards for the present era. Within the activation of radical hedonism we can witness one of the extraordinary and contradictory living tensions of our world.

The concept of unlimited pleasure forms a strange contradiction to the ideal of disciplined work, similar to the contradiction between the acceptance of an obsessional work ethic and the ideal of complete laziness during the rest of the day and during vacations. The endless assembly line belt and the bureaucratic routine on the one hand, and the television, the automobile, and sex on the other, make the contradictory combination possible. Obsessional work alone would drive people just as crazy as would complete laziness. With the combination, they can live. Besides, both contradictory attitudes correspond to an economic necessity: twentieth-century capitalism is based on maximum consumption of the goods and services produced as well as on routinized teamwork. (Fromm, 1976, xxvii)

As radical hedonism fits in well with an obsessional work ethic, unlimited egotism also fits within a dynamic of social, or anti-social, contradiction.

To be an egoist refers not only to my behavior but to my character. It means: that I want everything for myself; that possessing, not sharing, gives me pleasure; that I must become greedy because if my aim is having, I am more the more I have; that I must feel antagonistic toward all others: my customers whom I want to deceive, my competitors whom I want to destroy, my workers whom I want to exploit. I can never be satisfied, because there is no end to my wishes; I must be envious of those who have more and afraid of those who have less. But I have to repress all these feelings in order to represent myself (to others as well as myself) as the smiling, rational, sincere, kind human being everyone pretends to be. (Fromm, 1976, xxviii)

No doubt we can see ourselves and our fellow citizens caught up in these motives toward pleasure and substantiation and individualization of our "selves." The isolation and alienation that we experience can be deadening. The shocking rise in deaths by suicide among all segments of society no longer shocks us as we continue in our daily battles to keep despair and futility at bay aided by an incessant onslaught of short term pleasure producing products and experiences. These products and experiences offer little solace as they represent only the superficial trappings of nostalgic well-being, ease, and triumph which are but a shade of the kinds of involved being-in-the-world which our humanity demands. We can understand these things and experiences as useless except to the extent that they keep us from the despair which would lead to the

intolerable (in relation to the established order of capitalistic production) inability to maintain the modes and processes of producing these very products and experiences of relentless consumption.

Fromm portrays the insidiousness of this social equation in his description of the "marketing character." Marx's notion of the alienated human separated from their own creative powers in the pursuit of created objects and experiences only partially expresses the condition of the late twentieth century human condition. Fromm describes the "marketing character" against the "authoritarian-obsessive-hoarding character" whose development from the sixteenth century Marx has described as particular to the growth of the bourgeoisie. The marketing character must be understood in terms of people experiencing themselves not as useful interactive beings in the world but as commodities with some "exchange value." The "use value," or usefulness, of a person is a necessary but insufficient component of this exchange value which is largely dependent upon the marketability of their personality. Fromm states:

Success depends largely on how well persons sell themselves on the market, how well they get their 'personality' across, how nice a 'package' they are; whether they are 'cheerful,' 'sound,' 'aggressive,' 'reliable,' 'ambitious'; furthermore, what their family backgrounds are, what clubs they belong to, and whether they know the 'right' people. (Fromm, 1976, 133)

The marketing character is completely at the whim of those who would be purchasers of their being and image, and is in the position of perpetually adjusting their affect and egos to please those who might "have" them. The price on their personhood is extraordinary. Fromm describes them thus:

Those with the marketing character structure are without goals, except moving, doing things with the greatest efficiency; if asked why they must move so fast, why things have to be done with the greatest efficiency, they have no genuine answer, but offer rationalizations, such as, "in order to create more jobs," or "in order to keep the company growing." They have little interest (at least consciously) in philosophical or religious questions, such as *why* one lives, and *why* one is going in this direction rather than in another. They have their big, ever-changing egos, but none has a self, a core, a sense of identity. (Fromm, 1976, 133-134)

Crucial to understanding the problems of the marketing character in relationship to democratic activity is how this character has become deprived of any stable identity and selfhood. Such identity and selfhood, both for Fromm and for Marx, are necessary to be morally and ethically engaged and responsive in the world.

Fromm's marketing character is necessarily non-critical and unquestioning of processes and functioning of their larger world. To question would endanger the very salability of their easily and amiably mutable character and such salability is the essential anchorline of such a character.

Since the marketing characters have no deep attachment to themselves or to others, they do not care, in any deep sense of

the word, not because they are so selfish but because their relations to others and to themselves are so thin. This may also explain why they are not concerned with the dangers of nuclear and ecological catastrophes, even though they know that all the data point to these dangers. That they are not concerned with the danger to their personal lives might still be explained by the assumption that they have great courage and unselfishness; but the lack of concern even for their children and grandchildren excludes such explanation. The lack of concern on all these levels is the result of the loss of any emotional ties, even to those "nearest" to them. The fact is, nobody is close to the marketing characters; neither are they close to themselves. (Fromm, 1976, 134)

For such people, and such a community of people, the abstract and alienated human animal who is infinitely mutable, adaptable and behaviorally modifiable becomes the worshipped god of the species. This human god of the global corporation and the mega-bureaucracy stands as the ultimate idol against which Marx warns in his vision of the development of capitalism. And in such a paganism there is an ever shrinking place for rationality, critical reflection and democratic activity since all of these practices require lives of growing attachment and commitment to each other and our world.

For Fromm, there is no greater proof to the thesis that we are currently involved in a complex pattern of estrangement from ourselves and our world than the dual specters of nuclear holocaust and impending ecological catastrophe. Our alienated positions within our world are standing in the way of the most serious call to action and solidarity we have ever heard before--the call to actively plan for the survival of human life and being.

## **Christopher Lasch And The Survival Mentality**

Throughout all of his writings, Christopher Lasch is likewise insistent that our narrowing proximity to the brink of nuclear annihilation and environmental collapse is what most poignantly illustrates the current condition of our human processes and abilities to come together to create the world we consciously envision. In marked contrast to Fromm, however, Lasch does not believe that contemporary modes of hedonism and radical egotism are primarily at the structural foundation of our current inability to responsibly create a decent and just world for ourselves. Instead, Lasch indicts current constructions and manifestations of the self as besieged and in preparation for the absolute worst of possible outcomes as blocking the way of our coming together in the realization of any significant political action.

Lasch argues that instead of calling ourselves together for some significant political action, social and political commentators have been involved in the kinds of Doomsday critique which invite us to recoil from the world to an inward world of emotional retreat and isolation. Lasch is critical of a moral commitment to survival in the face of impending ecological or technological catastrophe because, he argues, there is no reason to believe that such a "survival mentality" will lead to productive political activity. This mentality might more easily lead to attitudes and policies of short-term survivalism manifested in isolationism and increased militarism.

Lasch finds such a warning in the writing of Richard Falk in his book **This Endangered Planet**. "The great danger of an apocalyptic argument is that to the extent it persuades, it also immobilizes (In Lasch, 1984, 17)" Lasch criticizes Falk, as he criticizes a host of other ecological and peace movement writers, for failing to heed his own warning against the kind of despairing cynicism which immobilizes people. Falk succumbs to a debilitating futility with the stated fear that "there is little hope that our children will avoid the apocalypse (Falk in Lasch, 1984, 17)." Such fears and beliefs of powerlessness and futility in the face of our present extraordinary social challenges only lead us further from the kinds of global thinking and action which might successfully address these challenges.

Lasch is a firm believer in democratic process and corresponding political activity. He states:

Political action remains the only effective defense against disaster--political action, that is, that incorporates our new understanding of the dangers of unlimited economic growth, unlimited technological development, and the unlimited exploitation of nature . . .and that political opposition to these evils . . . represents an indispensable beginning in the struggle to make our world fit for human habitation. (Lasch, 1984, 18)

For Lasch, however, it is the emergence of the "siege mentality," of the "minimal self" which is driving us further and further from responsive and committed social action. It is important that we

investigate the construction and qualities of this "siege mentality" and of such a "minimal self."

For Lasch we must begin with an investigation of the problems and contradictions which are the very hallmarks of what he calls the "achievement of selfhood." Such an investigation must start with the recognition that our very being human is necessarily dependent on certain experiences and realities of separation and alienation. In the following passage we are presented with Lasch's general understanding of the self as well as how such an understanding influences our vision for a responsive democracy.

The achievement of selfhood, which our culture makes so difficult, might be defined as the acknowledgment of our separation from the original source of life, combined with a continuing struggle to recapture a sense of primal union by means of activity that gives us a provisional understanding and mastery of the world without denying our limitations and dependency. Selfhood is the painful awareness of the tension between our unlimited aspirations and our limited understanding, between our original intimations of immortality and our fallen state, between oneness and separation. A new culture--a postindustrial culture, if you like--has to be based on a recognition of these contradictions in human experience, not on a technology that tries to restore the illusion of self-sufficiency or, on the other hand, on a radical denial of selfhood that tries to restore the illusion of absolute unity with nature. (Lasch, 1984, 20)

In such a construction, experiences of alienation are foundational to our humanity, without which we would remain in unconscious and unreflective moment to moment existence. For Lasch, certain experiences of alienation are foundational to our experience as

human beings in the world. We cannot escape, nor should we want to, the demanding tensions we experience between our "unlimited aspirations and our limited understanding" of the world, our longings for immortality as we are aware of our own mortality, and our desires for oneness and unity as we experience ongoing separation and distance from other people in our world. Instead of trying to dissolve such tensions, Lasch warns us of two pervasive contemporary trends which are aimed at dissolving, eradicating, or concealing these tensions. By trying to restore some illusion of self-sufficiency and individualism or by attempting to establish human experience and consciousness within an "absolute" unity with "nature" far more dangerous and debilitating configurations of alienation emerge.

For Lasch we can see the underpinnings of our proclivity to deny the contradictions of our alienated relationship with the world by looking into the ways that our culture represents itself less and less with tangible and durable objects and replaces these objects with "a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy (Lasch, 1984, 19)." Lasch looks into the ways we are currently organized in relation to specific contemporary modes of commodity production and consumption. Our world has become a place where commodities no longer have value associated with their usefulness or durability, but rather with their marketable appeal and performance. By shifting our understanding and expectation of created goods away from their usefulness and permanence to their qualities of style and fashion,

and with built-in obsolescence in relation to technology and design, objects no longer have the kind of independence from their producers they once had. Lasch quotes Hannah Arendt:

It is this durability [of articles which are produced for their use value and not their fashion value] that gives the things of the world their relative independence from men [sic] who produced and used them, their 'objectivity' which makes them withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time . . . . From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that . . . men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. (Lasch, 1984, 31)

Lasch believes that our identities have become so problematic and uncertain largely because we no longer live in "a world which exists independently" of ourselves. According to Lasch, we should be less concerned with the problems of identity formation and experience in relation to changing social stations and categories than with the ways in which our activities of production and consumption are based on fantasies rather than on concrete human needs.

Lasch agrees with Fromm that our modern commodity culture teaches people to become marketable commodities themselves, shaping their identity and "self as another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market (Lasch, 1984, 30)." Such an identity formation requires an infinite mutability of personal character in order to meet the requirements of any day's particular market. Such a self is essentially prevented from any enduring and

substantial character development in relation to moral or ethical concerns because moral and ethical development can be shaped insofar as it meets the demands of an employer or purchaser of the "human working commodity." Such moral or ethical development, then, can be no more than part of an image packaging program on the part of the person who has placed himself on the market. These marketing strategies cannot be seen within the context of responsible and responsive ethical and moral development as any such development is antithetical to that which is bought and sold on the market.

Lasch has described such a character as "the narcissistic personality of our time" and warns that:

A culture organized around mass consumption encourages narcissism--which we can define...as a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more particularly as a projection of one's own fears and desires--not because it makes people grasping and self-assertive but because it makes them weak and dependent. It undermines their confidence in their capacity to understand and shape the world and to provide for their own needs. The consumer feels that he [sic] lives in a world that defies practical understanding and control, a world of giant bureaucracies, "information overload," and complex, interlocking technological systems vulnerable to sudden breakdown, like the giant power failure that blacked out the Northeast in 1965 or the radiation leak at Three Mile Island in 1979. (Lasch, 1984, 33)

In such a world humans no longer come to a world of their own conscientious and conscious creation--a creation which is marked by stability and order--but rather, come to a world that is more a

reflection of their wishes and fears made increasingly unintelligible by the flurry of changing images which represent these wishes and fears. As human desires and imaged needs become the predominant subject of our conscious reflection and activity, the world of public discourse and concern falls further and further from possibility and even from view.

The age of enlightenment promise that scientific rationality, as the best answer to whatever ails us, both personally and socially, can no longer be substantially justified. Furthermore, the promises of science to replace "discredited metaphysical traditions with a coherent explanation of the world" and our place in it have failed to restore the stability of our modern identities from our retreat into a world of interior isolation and fantasy. Lasch reminds us that not only does science not recreate a public world it is also incapable of telling people how to best live their lives in the construction of a just and caring society. Instead, Lasch argues, science "heightens the prevailing sense of unreality by giving men [sic] the power to achieve their wildest flights of fancy" and "removes the last obstacle to wishful thinking" by bringing reality into conformity "with our nightmares (Lasch, 1984, 33)." It is not hard to find very real examples of nightmarish creations as both the legacy of nuclear weaponry and our present proximity to ecological catastrophe attest.

In societies whose base has become that of mass production and mass consumption personal choice becomes the all-important test of human and social freedom. As freedom becomes more and more the issue of the kinds of petroleum we pump into our cars and

of the kinds of anti-perspirant we pump into our armpits, notions and ideals of ethical and political freedom are transformed into trivialized matters without clear reference or meaning. That we are "free" to choose has little more meaning than that we can select some particular style or image that is associated with a product. In such a world all choices become equally valid as we are told again and again that "our way" is the only morally acceptable way, no matter how "our way" might bear on the lives of others. One of the most extraordinary consequences of this thinking is the way it limits any foundation for society that we might construct based on particular moral and ethical commitments. Under these conditions, democratic discourse and activity must necessarily recede in favor of the kinds of political action which will permit and promote the greatest possible range and variety of consumer goods and services. As Lasch warns: "any attempt to win someone to your own point of view, or even to expose him [sic] to a point of view different to his own, becomes an intolerable interference with his freedom of choice (Lasch, 1984, 36)." The very kinds of "choices" that are possible in an advanced market economy preclude the public interchange of ideas and relegate the discussion of values to the halls of "freely chosen" churches, temples or social clubs.

Lasch argues that instead of trying to create more acceptable choices and outcomes in our culture of mass commodity consumption we reject the belief that industrialism and scientific rationality promote economic and political progress.

What if we reject the equation of industrialism with democracy and start instead from the premise that large scale industrial production undermines local institutions of self-government, weakens the party system, and discourages popular initiative? In that case, cultural analysis can no longer content itself with balancing the social and political gains allegedly attendant on industrial progress against cultural losses. It will have to decide instead whether the invasion of culture and personal life by the modern industrial system produces the same effects that it produces in the social and political realm: a loss of autonomy and popular control, a tendency to confuse self-determination with the exercise of consumer choices, a growing ascendance of elites, the replacement of practical skills with organized expertise. (Lasch, 1984, 41-42)

With this premise in mind it is not hard to understand the school as a kind of way station for sorting and instructing a growing army of technicians and servers who know little of the world around them and how they might actively construct a place for themselves in such a world.

The self of the 1990's is beleaguered and besieged. Unable to make the kinds of choices which might substantially transform reality, we are prepared to take what we can get given an extraordinary breadth of consumer choices as we struggle to bunker ourselves as securely and as comfortably as we can against a hostile world--a world which we can scarcely imagine as having been created by people remarkably similar to ourselves. Lasch tells us that the "minimal self" understands its place in the world as a "victim of circumstances" who "copes with crisis by preparing for the worst and by reassuring himself [sic] that the worst has a way of falling short of expectations (Lasch, 1984, 62)." The adoption of a "worst

possible scenario" mentality as a way of meeting the world makes any long ranging and rationally critical vision for the future a liberal pipe dream if not an absolute impossibility.

Lasch argues for a reappropriation and a re-reliance on practical reason as it relates to practical life and appeals to the Greek concept of *phronesis*:

The antidote to instrumental reason is practical reason, not mysticism, spirituality, or the power of "personhood." In the Aristotelian tradition of political theory, *phronesis* or practical reason describes the development of character, the moral perfection of life, and the virtues specific to various forms of practical activity . . . . The highest form of practice, for Aristotle and his followers, is politics, which seeks to promote the good life by conferring equal rights on all citizens so as to encourage citizens to test themselves against demanding standards of moral excellence (for example, in contests of oratorical skill and physical prowess) and thus to develop their gifts to the highest pitch. (Lasch, 1984, 253-254)

Lasch is not unaware of the problems of slavery , sexism and classism perpetuated by Athenian Greeks of Aristotle's day. What is important for our discussion is to understand how strongly Lasch emphasizes dynamic and interactive processes of democracy in addressing the considerable challenges of late industrial societies. Further, we should take notice of how similar this notion of democracy is to Scheffler's, which was detailed earlier in this chapter.

Lasch hopes that through the processes of practical reason we may no longer ignore the "need to restore the intermediate world of

practical activity, which binds man [sic] to nature in the capacity of a loving caretaker and cultivator (Lasch, 1984, 256)." This shift in our own self-understanding and subject position can only occur after a difficult reckoning with the unresolvable contradictions of our human condition. Says Lasch:

Human beings are part of an intricately interconnected evolutionary chain, but self-consciousness--the capacity to see the self from a point of view outside the self--distinguishes humanity from other forms of life and leads both to a sense of power over nature and to a sense of alienation from nature. Dependent on nature yet capable of transcending it, humanity wavers between transcendent pride and a humiliating sense of weakness and dependency. It seeks to dissolve this tension either by making itself altogether self-sufficient or by dreaming of a symbiotic reunion with the primordial source of life. The first path leads to the attempt to impose human will on nature through technology and to achieve an absolute independence from nature; the second, to a complete surrender of the will. (Lasch, 1984, 256)

Within such an understanding of the self rationality, however necessary, will always be inadequate toward creating a responsible and responsive society. Only a critical awareness of our "divided nature," as Lasch calls it, can lead us from the demons of technical rationality and unhindered progress, on the one hand, and a complete surrender of will and consciousness aimed at complete cosmic reunification, on the other.

Lasch asserts instead that "selfhood expresses itself in the form of a guilty conscience, the painful awareness of the gulf between human aspirations and human limitations (Lasch, 1984, 258)."

Robert Bellah, et al, in their book **Habits of the Heart** look into the lives of middle class Americans with a similar understanding of the tensions of human consciousness which Lasch has described.

### **Robert Bellah And Our Habits Of The Heart**

In their work **Habits of the Heart**, Robert Bellah and his co-researchers Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton complete a five year investigation into the patterns of life in 1980's America. They have entitled their work with Alexis de Toqueville's expression "habits of the heart" which refers to American "mores" which they maintain are a combination of traits which constitutes something of a "national character." Their goal was to map out and describe the traditions which Americans use to make sense of themselves and their lives in society. Their particular focus is on the conflict between our ever-enlarging agenda and consciousness of individualism and our dire need for greater community commitment and solidarity with one another.

Their findings and observations are startling and portray a culture which is rapidly losing the languages with which it might make a substantial and critically active moral sense of the world. Their work, however, is never nihilistic nor does it become cynical and hopeless; this is largely due to the importance their research places on the mores or "habits of the heart" of Americans rather than on the larger political and economic structures which impact daily American life. By focusing their work on the culture, consciousness

and practices of daily life, they are in a position to avoid reifying the structures and mechanisms of late capitalist advanced industrial culture, while not neglecting or sidestepping the importance of such structures, as they investigate possibilities for structural change:

Much of the thinking about our society and where it should be going is rather narrowly focused on our political economy. This focus makes sense in that government and the corporations are the most powerful structures in our society and affect everything else, including our culture and character. But as an exclusive concern, such a focus is severely limited. Structures are not unchanging. They are frequently altered by social movements, which grow out of, and also influence, changes in consciousness, climates of opinion, and culture . . . . It makes sense to study the mores not because they are powerful--in the short run, at least, power belongs to the political and economic structures--but for two other reasons. A study of the mores gives us insight into the state of society, its coherence, and its long-term viability. Secondly, it is in the sphere of the mores, and the climates of opinion they express, that we are apt to discern incipient changes of vision--those new flights of the social imagination that may indicate where society is heading. (Bellah, 1985, 275)

Within these parameters of investigation **Habits of the Heart** uncovers and unmask a world that we have created and continue to perpetuate which positions us further and further from adequately addressing many of our most pressing personal and global concerns.

For Bellah, et al., as with Fromm and Lasch, the horror of our present condition can be no more vividly characterized than by the double condition of our having the extraordinary possibility of destroying all human life through nuclear purpose or accident while

our physical ecology and environment teeters on the brink of irreversible and devastating collapse. And likewise with Fromm and Lasch, Bellah et al. insist that we look into the processes of our personal lives and belief patterns, what they call our "social ecology," in relation to such devastating possibilities:

Modernity has had comparable destructive consequences for social ecology [as compared to nuclear and environmental crises]. Human beings have treated one another badly for as long as we have any historical evidence, but modernity has given us a capacity for destructiveness on a scale comparably greater than in previous centuries. And social ecology is damaged not only by war, genocide, and political repression. It is also damaged by the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone. It has been evident for some time that unless we begin to repair the damage to our social ecology, we will destroy ourselves long before natural ecological disaster has time to be realized. (Bellah, 1985, 284)

Within such a stance social ecology, which the Bellah team use to refer to the ways in which humans and other living things exist in relationship, is not seen as the same as ecological science, but rather is understood as inseparable from ecological science, since "every ecological 'fact' has ethical significance (Bellah, 1985, 284)."

From this position of an understood ethical quality of every human action and interaction the Bellah team has explored modern constructions and experiences of individualism and alienation. They attribute modern trends of individualism as emerging in Enlightenment responses in the struggle against the authority of the seventeenth century monarchy and aristocracy. The Bellah team

demonstrate how these trends and notions of the individual contain little at all of the context of moral and religious obligation demanded by either the kind of classical republicanism or biblical utopianism described earlier in this chapter. Both of these latter traditions position individual autonomy and freedom within particular contexts of moral responsibility and active social commitment and, as such, demand a government which is based of the continual, and voluntary, participation of its citizenry.

The Bellah team identifies John Locke as a key figure in creating a policy of individual rights which have as their basis the maximization and celebration of individual self-interest over the interests or well-being of the larger community. Such a position requires the premise that the "individual is prior to society" and therefore must be primarily concerned with individual, rather than social, responsibility. Bellah et al. attribute the growth and development of both utilitarian and expressive traditions of individualism to the practical manifestation of this Lockean position. They suggest that it is important to understand, however, that modern individualism has coexisted in America with both classical republicanism and biblical religion. The tension between these positions has been muffled, however, because of the underlying affirmations of the "dignity and autonomy of the individual" which is philosophically and in practice necessary to all three (Bellah, 1985, 143). If we refrain from understanding the differences between such formulations, moral and ethical interrelatedness easily collapses into something which we might "freely choose" at our convenience

and inclination rather than as a fundamental way of viewing our relationship with other people in the world with corresponding obligations and commitments.

As activities of modern individualism become more and more pervasive, and as republican and biblical notions of the responsible individual are increasingly devalued and underemphasized, the outcomes of such modes of individualism become more understood as our world "taken-for-granted," and less understood as the ways in which we have actively constructed our world in relation to our moral and ethical commitments. The Lockean position contributes to this problem because it describes such radical individualism in terms of our "natural" relationship to the world. Such a position interferes with our coming to terms with modern individualism as a socially constructed and enacted phenomenon with a particular constellation of interests and corresponding privileges. Much has been written on the limitations of constructing philosophy from a perspective of "natural science" which focuses almost exclusively on "detached" knowledge and understanding of the world. Husserl and Heidegger, among others, have described at length more participatory structures of knowledge. Such discussions, however, are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

The consequences of modern individualism are remarkable, especially the position such patterns leave us in regarding how we might address social, political and economic problems. In an advanced technological society which values individual "success" and "happiness" above all else:

Concern for rational problem solving (not to speak of social contribution) becomes subordinated to success measured only by income and consumption. When this happens . . . it raises doubts about the intrinsic value of the work itself. These doubts become all the more insistent when, as is often the case, the professional must operate in the context of a large public or private bureaucracy where much ingenuity must be spent, not on solving external problems, but on manipulating the bureaucratic rules and roles, both in order to get anything done and in order to move ahead in one's career. (Bellah, 1985, 149)

Such doubt reinforces a belief that whatever political action a citizen might desire or attempt will be trivialized to senselessness due to the bureaucracy. This expectation further isolates people from the potential meaningfulness of the relevant work of which they are capable. As modes of consumption, financial security, and particular expressions of a lifestyle become the primary way in which people evaluate their moral selves, "the good life" collapses into a breathless and mindless race against time toward autonomous individual achievement; the notion of "community" consequently collapses to what Bellah calls "the little circle of family and friends (Bellah, 1985, 291)."

The perversion of morality to the limits of commodity consumption and personal wealth which can only be measured in relation to the commodity consumption and financial wealth--of the "person next door"--leads to a bizarre kind of conformity in America and to what Toqueville argues is one of the most profound ambiguities of modern individualism. As the cult of the individual

grows in response to the death, or denial, of earlier traditions of justice and authority the expressions of individualism take on increasingly predictable and conformed expression. We have to look no further than expressions of popular styles among many enclaves of American adolescents. Some of the most rigid codes of conformity are maintained among groups who demand to "freely express their own individuality." The cultures of punks rockers and conservative "preppies" equally come to mind with their rigid dress codes, their highly specific consumer and leisure practices and their frighteningly predictable behaviors and communication styles.

Conformity is not the only fallout of trying to find "our true selves independent of any cultural or social influence, being responsible to that self alone, and making its fulfillment the very meaning of our lives (Bellah, 1985, 150)." In what Alisdair MacIntyre has spoken of as "bureaucratic individualism":

the ambiguities and contradictions of individualism are frighteningly revealed, as freedom to make private decisions is bought at the cost of turning over most public decisions to bureaucratic managers and experts. A bureaucratic individualism in which the consent of the governed, the first demand of modern enlightenment individualism, has been abandoned in all but form, illustrates the tendency of individualism to destroy its own conditions. (Bellah, 1985, 150)

Forms of bureaucratic individualism require us to "sell our souls," so to speak, for the privilege of unlimited consumer choices and experiences as we breathlessly strive toward the "free expression" of

our "inner being." All too sadly, the skills with which we might engage in activities of more meaningful and relevant expression toward some more "enlightened" living are in a state of decline and atrophy.

Bureaucratic individualism is the most advanced form of modern individualism described by Bellah et al. From such a "habit of the heart" we see the context and mechanisms which support a startling disengagement and alienation from the world. In this world human thought and power has created an amazing world of possibilities and vision. And yet within such a world there seem to be fewer and fewer boundaries against a global community of people living without basic necessities, education, medical care, respect and dignity--the list goes on. Instead we live with increasing poverty, despair and hopelessness. The most "successful" people of our world are most frequently seen in a desperate struggle to procure as many creature comforts and as much "security" as they can to buffet them against the world and other people.

And yet success is not entirely defined in terms of being isolated from others. On the contrary, community and associations with other people is a predominant goal within the "American character." We must see how the contradictory goals of the individual and of the community are bound together within experiences of modern individualism in America. Some of the most profound contradictions of our American consciousness are described by the Bellah team:

The deep desire for autonomy and self-reliance combined with an equally deep conviction that life has no meaning unless shared with others in the context of community; a commitment to the equal right to dignity of every individual combined with an effort to justify inequality of reward, which, when extreme, may deprive people of dignity; an insistence that life requires practical effectiveness and "realism" combined with the feeling that compromise is ethically fatal. The inner tensions of American individualism add up to a classic case of ambivalence. We strongly assert the value of our self-reliance and autonomy. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence altogether. The tensions of our lives would be even greater if we did not, in fact, engage in practices that constantly limit the effects of an isolating individualism, even though we cannot articulate those practices nearly as well as we can the quest for autonomy. (Bellah, 1984, 150-151)

These contradictions are at the very core of our American identity and serve to suspend us in a perceived, yet imaginary, web of political helplessness and inactivity. That we have so effectively articulated policies and procedures of radical individualism means that we can also formulate and articulate policies which lead to radical social responsibility and cohesion toward a more homelike world, a world which is worth living in for more of its inhabitants.

The Bellah team rail against the influences of modern individualism on our world.

For several centuries, we have embarked on a great effort to increase our freedom, wealth, and power. For over a hundred years, a large part of American people, the middle class, has imagined that the virtual meaning of life lies in the acquisition

of ever-increasing status, income, and authority, from which genuine freedom is supposed to come. Our achievements have been enormous. They permit us the aspiration to become a genuinely humane society in a genuinely decent world, and provide many of the means to achieve that aspiration. (Bellah, 1985, 284)

And yet:

What has failed at every level--from the society of nations to the local community to the family--is integration: we have failed to remember "our community as members of the same body," as John Winthrop put it. We have committed what to the republican founders of our nation was the cardinal sin: we have put our own good, as individuals, as groups, as a nation, ahead of the common good. (Bellah, 1985, 285)

The realities and consequences of these failures face us at every turn, from the horrors of hunger, homelessness, and meaninglessness which we let plague our nation to the atrocities which we commit on Iraqi battlefields to the genocide and destruction we permit in Bosnia. It is little wonder that we have retreated to ourselves and to our fantasies of "the good life" instead of joining together to insist that what has become the status quo be transformed.

### **Conclusions And Outlook**

Fromm, Lasch, and the Bellah team are fluent in describing the kinds of alienation and estrangement from our world which lead us further

and further from critically informed, rationally conceived, and politically activated transformation of our world into one which no longer suffers under the threat of nuclear annihilation and environmental collapse, a world in which people no longer suffer the indignities of hunger, homelessness, and meaningless work. Far from positions of cynicism and despair, they demand that humans be responsible and accountable for the world we have created and, through this responsibility and accountability, recognize that other realities can be constructed. Furthermore, Fromm, Lasch, and Bellah et al. believe that it is from the position of an activated social democracy that we might construct such a world.

Although not included here, their critique of alienation and individualism which sabotages responsible political thought and action in a democracy holds that the way in which we educate children is critically influential in constructing a commodity and experience hungry citizenry unwilling to question or challenge the status quo so long as a certain flow of goods and products continues.

We now turn to a discussion of how three critical pedagogists contextualize and describe patterns of alienation and social and political silence and voice as they are played out in classroom practice and life.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DEMOCRATIC FAITH: CRITICAL THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

I have entitled this chapter, and indeed this entire essay, "Democratic Faith." This is an active notion which I see being developed and advocated by all of the best critical theorists and educators I have read and interviewed. As developed in the preceding chapters, critical thinking is founded on the quest for a more just and decent world, given the fundamental understanding that no matter how much of our reality has been determined for us by our biological sex, our skin color, the particular financial circumstance into which we are born, and so on, what is ours, and what cannot be taken away from us are the ways in which we negotiate particular meanings and consequent relations of power within these contexts. What we are as people, those things which are integral to our being, are the ways in which we resist or accept or "find our way" through the social situations in which we must live.

More specifically, however, this chapter is concerned with the lives and experiences of students and teachers in schools. This chapter is designed to illustrate the ways in which particular forms of alienation are institutionalized and taught within the school environment. One of the most devastating manifestations of these forms of alienation is the subsequent collapse of students' and

teachers' abilities to engage in the kinds of critical dialogues necessary for democratic activity and community. The work of Paulo Freire, Ira Shor, and Michael Apple provide powerful and diverse critiques of the construction and institutionalization of alienation within schools, as each is committed to certain concepts and practices of liberatory democracy. Furthermore, Freire, Shor, and Apple recognize and explore the potency of certain popular cultural forms in addressing and combating these processes and enactments of alienation.

This chapter is divided into three major sections corresponding to the work of Freire, Shor and Apple. Each of these sections is further organized into sections of each particular thinker's analysis of the construction and institutionalization of alienation within schools, their analysis of the interrelationship between alienation and democratic activity and, finally, the particular ways in which each conceptualizes and addresses hope within contemporary processes of schooling.

### **Paulo Freire And A Pedagogy For Liberation**

Paulo Freire has been dedicated to developing liberatory modes of educational practice over the past four decades. In his monumental work **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, first published in 1970, Freire sets the framework for understanding what he sees has become the legacy of education over much of the past century.

## **Freire and institutionalized alienation within education**

Freire criticizes much of contemporary educational practice for the dehumanizing effect it has on our collective psyche and power in the world. These dehumanizing processes are not only part of educational practice but mirror the larger dynamics of advanced industrial societies. At the heart of Freire's analysis is the notion of a "banking concept" of education.

Freire offers ten core characterizations of what constitutes the banking concept and process of education which he understands is the driving force behind most contemporary trends of education today. Within a banking system of education Freire argues that:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen--meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his [sic] choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

(Freire, 1970, 59)

Within such an educational framework, students become so much human flesh to manage and control, commodities who must be conscious of their position as commodities if they are to somehow survive their schooling. A banking system is primarily interested in control of process toward specific and predictable outcomes. Similarly the outcomes, as predictable target behaviors, are set toward maximizing profit within the larger cultural and economic system. Everyone does not have the same role to play. On the contrary, there are highly specialized roles for each player which depend largely upon the social context and position into which that child is born. And yet, every person within such a human drama plays the role, as a commodified individual, of an isolated and self-absorbed unit in the larger social world.

The banking concept of education tacitly relies on the acceptance of the medieval notion of the "great chain of being." Into the world there are born the angels, the rulers, the owners, the managers, the laborers, and so on down to the most wretched of the earth. All of these categories, as we are to understand and accept within this model of the world, are quite natural and acceptable. As part of the natural order of things it becomes unacceptable to work toward a world in which poverty, hunger, and homelessness is nonexistent, on the very grounds that, since there have always been the dispossessed, there must and will always be the dispossessed, and naturally so.

Such notions are not particularly new to our understanding of what education "should" be. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, one of the

great authors of political democracy, advocated education for the masses so that we might harvest "a few geniuses from the rubbish" of the common run of humanity and citizenry. Within the banking concept of education, schools become the great sorting stations of a society. Such questions as: "What can we get out of all the human flesh from which we have to choose?" and "Who will best function where toward maximizing the profits and securing the power of our world?" become the most pressing within such educational modes.

Within the banking concept of education tests and testing become the crucial mechanism for sorting people into categories. Indeed, it is hard for most of us to think of a school and of education without thinking about testing people and then giving people grades. It must be clear to us, in fact, that one of the most "successful" things schools do is sort people into different categories which correspond to the different kinds of work and lives they might lead.

### **Freire and the interrelationship between alienation and democratic activity**

Freire maintains that the oppressed's desire to be like and to become the oppressor is central to understanding how modes of alienating oppression are maintained within the culture. Freire states:

The oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his [sic] way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressor, to imitate him, to follow him. (Freire; 49)

We do not have to look too deeply into school life to see how the students are all too eager to enact and attain the life of the oppressor. When students are given their hand at assessing other student's school work or monitoring students' behavior they will almost invariably rule with Draconian fervor. Indeed, the very process of "doing well at school" is about achieving and competing in ways which will elevate a student beyond other students, which will allow that person to move toward positions of privilege and power which will eclipse the positions and powers of others.

The entire school world is designed to hold out the hope, if not the actuality, of certain possibilities for all of its students. Current modes of schooling make it relatively clear that freedom and democracy are not the final goal. Instead, the highest aspirations of school children have to do with "the good life," a life free from individual restrictions on luxury, security and power. That other people may suffer in this acquisition of position is hardly acknowledged or questioned, that someone's position of power and influence is related to owning the labor, power and positions of other people is rarely addressed as any kind of significant social issue.

In the culture of schools Freire criticizes the role of teacher and student in processes of communication. Freire describes the student-teacher relationship as primarily narrative, with each actor, the teacher and the student, having a very static role in the narrative process. The teacher is the narrating subject and the students are the objects of the narration. Within such a banking process of

education, in which students are empty vessels to be filled with information from the teacher, "educational" processes separate students, alienate students, from meaningful and critical processes of education which might significantly envision and approach a more just world order. Freedom and democracy become impossible in such a banking/commodity culture as the voices and activities of student citizens are silenced except to the extent that they regurgitate the narration and follow the directions of the teacher.

Within such a culture alienation becomes a taken for granted reality of life. Students learn that isolation, powerlessness, silence and objectification, however painful they may be, are "natural" processes of being human. Furthermore, they see that people who can successfully operate within such conditions in the world will be significantly rewarded. The prizes for successfully negotiating life in an alienated and politically silencing advanced capitalist society are great and images of these prizes and this good life are set everywhere about us.

### **Freire's call for cultural synthesis as a liberating process of dialogical action**

For Freire any hope for liberation is connected to people achieving ownership and control of their own labor. He states:

The essence of this solution can be found in the . . . statement by bishops of the Third World that "if the workers do not somehow come to be owners of their own labor, all structural

reforms will be ineffective . . . they [must] be owners, not sellers, of their labor . . . [for] any purchase or sale is a form of slavery.

To achieve critical consciousness of the facts that it is necessary to be the "owner of one's labor," that labor "constitutes part of the human person," and that "a human being can neither be sold nor can he sell himself" is to go beyond the deception of palliative solutions. It is to engage in authentic transformation of reality in order, by humanizing that reality, to humanize men [sic].

In the antidialogical theory of action, cultural invasion serves the ends of manipulation, which in turn serves the ends of conquest, and conquest the ends of domination. Cultural synthesis serves the ends of organization; organization serves the ends of liberation. (Freire; 185)

In this passage Freire links the transformative and liberational possibilities of a Marxian critical consciousness with the activities of "cultural synthesis." Cultural synthesis is the theory of action which Freire recommends and is at the heart of his construction of dialogical cultural action, as will become more clear as we continue.

So what is the position of school children in relation to the kinds of alienation and oppression which they experience in everyday school situations? As I have stated before, possibility exists in particular practices of critical reflection and consciousness of the oppressed's relationship to those who teach, institutionalize, and thus make natural their oppression. Freire frames the problem in this way:

The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be

"hosts" of the oppressors can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which *to be* is *to be like*, and *to be like* is *to be like the oppressor*, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization (Freire; 33).

Within such awarenesses and activity the subject position of teachers and students is radically altered as both parties reflectively examine and evaluate their own thinking and behavior in relation to oppressive forces in society. A most challenging element of any such transformational process, then, is critical awareness of how oppressed peoples--for our purposes students and teachers--are "hosts" to the dehumanizing and alienating consciousness and activities of the oppressors.

Freire speaks of "co-intentional" education as foundational for critically recreating the world, and in this restructuring the disempowering object-position of either student or teacher is entirely dropped:

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality are both Subjects, not only in their task of unveiling reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in their struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but common involvement. (Freire; 56)

In such a world knowledge is a dynamic activity which is understood and re-created through reflection and action toward some greater and more just vision of the world. Schools necessarily become places for social awareness and change.

In relation to elements of popular culture Freire, I believe, is suggesting two distinct possibilities. On the one hand, texts of popular culture, and for our purposes film texts, can easily be used in ways that dull our critical awareness, contribute to our "hosting" the consciousness of oppression and maintain an objectified realm of human experience. Indeed, by turning to the consciousness-numbing presentations of popular culture which exist everywhere about us, the retreat from the critical challenges of empowered and participatory democracy is an almost certainty. On the other hand, the critical reading of texts of popular culture might well be an "instrument for critical discovery" unveiling the ways in which both oppressor and oppressed collude in dehumanized and alienated living.

Freire's notion of "cultural synthesis" becomes a bit clearer in this respect as we understand cultural synthesis to be owned by and enacted by the people suffering particular silencing forms of oppression. For any such readings of popular texts to have transformative power, therefore, it is essential that they be read from the experiences and understandings of the oppressed, the students, instead of from the points-of-view and subjective experiences and constructions of their masters, except as the masters

begin to understand and question and challenge their own positions of silence, voicelessness and oppression.

Genuine readings of popular texts require that there are no sideline observers. As Freire demands: "in cultural action, there are no spectators; the object of the actors' action is the reality to be transformed for the liberation of men [sic] (Freire; 182)." But it is not only the students and teachers who are involved in such a conversation toward cultural synthesis: "in cultural synthesis, the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both performs [sic] upon the world (Freire; 182)." In the process of reading texts of popular culture, and for our purposes popular film, new conversations not only become possible, but are essential parts of any liberatory process.

For Freire, readings of popular film texts must necessarily be involved in uncovering and disclosing the ways in which people have learned to accept disempowering and silencing modes of alienation. Such readings are intimately connected to transformative action towards a more free world. Freire states:

Knowledge of the alienated culture leads to transforming action resulting in a culture which is being freed from alienation. The more sophisticated knowledge of the leaders is remade in the empirical knowledge of the people, while the latter is reformed by the former (Freire; 183).

Given such a charge, any pedagogical activity involving the critical reading of popular film must be grounded in liberatory and utopian

consciousness. Only within such commitments might these pedagogical practices find their transformative successes.

We must understand that for Freire cultural action either furthers processes of conscious or unconscious domination or it furthers processes of human liberation (Freire; 180). There is no middle ground. Other writers in popular culture say that both can occur simultaneously given the contradictory character of popular culture. Such thinking will be more fully explored in Chapter Four. Freire sees the liberatory processes of pedagogy unfolding in two stages:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men [sic] in the processes of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always in action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted. (Freire; 40)

Within the school setting this suggests an environment for critical reading which is no longer bound by rigid rules and formulae. By loosening the confines of what is acceptable classroom practice with these cultural readings, Freire's two stages of a liberatory pedagogy might begin to be brought into practice.

## **Ira Shor And Critical Teaching In Everyday Life**

In **Critical Teaching and Everyday Life** Ira Shor asks the questions for United States culture which Freire has posed for South Americans. Shor has written with Freire and their concerns are similar. With a commitment to the possibilities of critical thought Shor poses the question in this way:

The powerlessness and confusion in daily life can only be understood through critical thinking, yet most people are alienated from their own conceptual habits of mind. How come? Why don't masses of people engage in social reflection? Why isn't introspection an habitual feature of life? What prevents popular awareness of how the whole system operates, and which alternatives would best serve human needs? Why is political imagination driven from common experience? Confronted by an "eclipse of reason" in mass culture, what can liberatory pedagogy do? (Shor; 47)

Shor's questions are about unmasking and disclosing the processes by which people are kept from their own liberatory and transformative potential. Shor is keenly aware of the kinds of alienation which keep people from coming together in politically meaningful ways and addresses ways in which the culture of schooling is implicated in these processes of alienation.

## **Shor and institutionalized alienation within education**

Ira Shor connects the historical development of schooling in America with the changing and contradictory demands of industrial capitalist society. For Shor, school must be primarily understood as a means of social control, as a means of bringing together diverse groups of people into predictable and generally "safe" and non-threatening patterns of behavior which support and contribute to the economic and political status quo of the nation.

In the following historical analysis of the development of schooling movements in the US. Shor sets the stage for understanding how current modes of elongating school experience have been constructed:

A wildly growing and uncontrollable machine economy rushed across the land transforming everything it touched, new things it needed. In such a milieu, the early school reformers had every reason to be hopeful and every reason to push ahead boldly. Confronting them was a scene of national disorder: A wildly growing and uncontrollable machine economy rushed across the land transforming everything it touched, new things periods of boom and bust, massive unemployment alternating with sudden demands for labor, ragamuffin gangs of unschooled children wandering the streets, great wealth and over-production side by side with abject poverty, a peasant-based workforce fresh from feudal countries of Europe, which needed conversion to urban life, English, machine culture, and republican institutions. . . . Great expectations were applied to education to democratize, equalize and stabilize an unsettled society. Yet, each form of schooling proved inadequate to the task. More layers were needed on top of the ones in place, spawning an immense education bureaucracy and the planting of another professional interest group in American life.(Shor; 2)

This analysis directly connects the public school movement with goals of greater social control and social cohesion. Shor also suggests that there are distinct limits to the amount and quality of social control which might be employed through formal systems of public education, although historically, institutions of public education have sought greater and continued control through a pattern of continually elongating required and recommended educational activity.

Shor sees the vocational community college movement as the most recent development in the ongoing elongation of schooling obligations for a majority of Americans:

Community colleges assume custodial care of all those students caught between part and full-time job lives. For a good portion of their non-employment and non-family work hours, worker students are kept off the streets, supervised on campus by professional, state-employed authorities. This collegiate warehousing amounts to the cultural occupation of life by public institutions. What school, family and job cannot invade, the mass culture industry then covers. The result is the liquidation of autonomous time and space. This is an issue of systemic importance. The continued hegemony of corporate life in America rests on its ability to crowd out alternatives. (Shor; 8)

This is not an optimistic analysis for it assumes that social control, not the betterment of life chances, is at the root of the development and expansion of the vocational school movement. Furthermore, schooling is functionally described as a warehousing movement designed to keep unemployed and otherwise idle people occupied in

ways which might prevent people from engaging in socially "dangerous" or subversive behaviors. Most important to this analysis is what Shor calls the subsequent "liquidation of autonomous time and space," the kind of time and space which we must understand as essential for critical thinking and consciousness and which must precede any informed democratic space and activity.

Schooling figures strongly in these processes of social pre-occupation and control and Shor makes direct connections between artificial elongations of schooling with the kinds of experienced alienation rife in American culture today. Furthermore, the following passage clarifies Shor's position on the interrelationship between an advanced capitalist industrial workforce and the creation and development of educational policies and programs:

As private enterprise employs fewer people for fewer hours, the number of workers unregimented by work increases. As the work world supervises workers less, school has been arbitrarily prolonged to supervise them more. It appears that the extension of school through college is still not enough. The invasion of unorganized time in daily life will be completed through the concept of "life-long learning." This contradiction between the actual and the apparent functions of schooling serves to discredit the whole enterprise. Because the artificial elongation of school makes it into a warehouse instead of a learning center, it is an illegitimate imposition on people's freedom and time. Students wind up being pulled in opposite directions by this. On the one hand, they need real education and school credentials for the job market; on the other hand their time is being wasted. The result is a lot of anger, destruction of school property and attacks on teachers. After years of regimentation, students know how to sabotage classes at any level of schooling. . . . An elaborate exercise in order has produced alienation and disorder. (Shor; 9)

Shor makes clear his understanding of the double bind of students who are caught between the necessity of obtaining increasingly rigorous educational qualifications for placement in almost all sectors of the work force and the meaninglessness and emptiness of much of these educational programs as related to their real life needs and experiences.

As students' real life needs grow and change in relation to often overwhelming and mind-numbing changes in society, and as it is becoming increasingly difficult and more complicated to make a life and a living in late twentieth century America, educational practices remain remarkably static. Instead of questioning the fundamental processes of pedagogy and curriculum in relation to the real needs of students, educational change is almost exclusively concerned with promoting more of the same.

There is a reassuring simplicity in the old ways of teaching. They may not work very well, but they are a solid tradition to fall back on--the hour-long lesson, the documented lecture, the Socratic discussion, the course outline and sturdy reading list, the separate canon for each discipline, the term paper and final exam. It is well organized and very busy. The irony of this order is not simply the static knowledge it produces, but also the alienation it provokes. (Shor: 122)

And so, for the sake of familiar and orderly educational activity, the band relentlessly plays on. "Common sense" and nervously restricted notions of what ought to happen in education overpower critically reflective and radically challenging educational vision and practice.

Shor credits the institutionalization of reified consciousness as foundational for much of our culture's inability to penetrate the processes by which daily life are restricted to unfulfilling and alienating patterns and the subsequent inability of public forms of education to address the real needs of students today. He distinguishes reified thought and reified consciousness in the following ways:

Reified thought is static and contained. The parts of the social whole are changeable and related, but reified consciousness experiences life in stationary pieces. This mental narrowing originates from the isolated fragment of labor each person performs on the job. On one side, we have the detailed division of labor turning work-activity into dissociated, trivial and repetitive tasks. On the other side we have commodity markets delivering our material needs through invisible processes, an enormous chain of appropriation, production and distribution of which the single purchase by an anonymous consumer at the end is but the tip of the social iceberg. On still another side, we have the institutions of public life--such as the internal revenue service, the motor vehicle bureau, the schools--whose compulsory transactions appear independent of or beyond human intervention. Simultaneously invisible and imposing, too present and too intangible, the system gains an aura of mysteriousness and invulnerability. Popular powerlessness results from feeling overwhelmed by an oppressive yet incomprehensible system. The contradictory presence and elusiveness of social control leads to confusion about what freedom is or what are the means to be free, happy and whole. Driven by such confused consciousness, people act against their own interests, against their need for power. (Shor; 56-57)

It is essential that we understand Shor's critique, along with Freire's, as grounded in a political and economic understanding of the world.

The kinds of reified consciousness Shor describes are peculiar to advanced industrial capitalist societies. And so, therefore, our understanding of current constructions of alienated consciousness must be grounded within such a critical framework.

In addressing the classroom Shor decries the absence of substantial and critical thinking related to the most pressing issues of our day:

What is most apparent in this state of thought is the underdevelopment of consciousness. Whether the issue is feminism, racism, or socialism, there is virtually no mature thought in the problem in any class. (Shor: 220)

The problem for Shor is what he calls the "underdevelopment of consciousness." We will now turn to an investigation of some of the dynamics Shor understands as related to the dearth of consciousness in our culture and, subsequently, in our schools in advanced industrial capitalist societies.

### **Shor on the interrelationship between alienation and democracy and educational practice**

Shor identifies a number of belief patterns which keep citizens from the kinds of critical scientific rationality which might bear on empowering political action. Following are an introduction of Shor's particular notions of "pre-scientific thinking," "cultural spectatorism," and "beating the system" and a discussion of their presence in

everyday school experience. All three of these cultural patterns of belief, judgment, and behavior are examples and outcomes of the kind of reified consciousness which has been described above.

### **Shor and pre-scientific thinking**

Pre-scientific thinking is pervasive in western industrial societies for a number of reasons, Shor argues, and supports mystified and non-critical thought as well as irrational behavior. Within pre-scientific thinking people can escape the rigors of addressing the historical and political contexts of the construction of everyday reality and instead can give mystical and mystified explanations as to why some people suffer in their lives and others do not. Pre-scientific thinking allows people to accept the irrational dehumanization of other people.

Shor offers five distinct practices of pre-scientific thinking in everyday experience. He calls these the myths of: "human nature," "lady luck," "brand-name loyalty," "common sense," and "hero worship." After introducing each, I will describe some of the ways in which these irrational processes of understanding reality have been institutionalized in everyday school life (Shor; 61-62).

The belief in "human nature" as a fixed and inherently flawed characteristic of being human is a myth which explains away almost all of the social horrors troubling our world. People engage in wars, exploit and impoverish workers in third world countries and wreck the environment's ability to sustain itself not because humans have made very real choices in their lives and with other people, but

because we all have these nasty bits of human nature which keep us from any more responsible action and which, indeed, make bad and immoral action inevitable. Shor holds that this flawed belief pattern gives people a "moral holiday," freeing them from any critical reflection or personal responsibility for intervening in history.

In schools our rigid adherence to the bell-curve and other such scales of evaluation which maintain that there will always be a fixed proportion of "winners" and of "losers" in every academic situation maintains such a belief in human nature. In this way school becomes a place where we learn that it is "natural" for a significant proportion of every class to be failures, to lose out on the feelings and experiences of even adequate or average achievement. The power of these scales of evaluation is enormous: they are so embedded in everyday school experience that we would certainly find it strange if they were not there. Within the parameters of their particular construction they cannot be overcome. If the people at the lowest end of the scale work and achieve so that their performance significantly improves, then one of at least two things happens. If no other groups have significantly improved in their marks, then the next lowest of these become the failures. If all groups have done somewhat better in their marks the scale is altered so that the proportion of successes and failures remains constant.

In this Catch-22 situation the underlying belief that within every group of students there will be regular proportions of successes and failures is never questioned. The scale may be flawed and need adjusting. The evaluation technique may need alterations

to provide the desired symmetry of outcomes. But in the end the class stratification always remains and with it the embedded belief that it is natural and right that there are certain proportions of winners and losers in the world. Further, because evaluation scales are constructed so that they are modified only on technical criteria and almost never on a fundamental and critical level, such scales enforce a belief in our own powerlessness in the world. We might even hear a voice from on high: "The poor will always be with us, the failures, the war ravaged, the desolate." And, as we are to believe, there is piteously little we can do about these things. Human nature, and the corresponding and inevitable unequal distribution of successes and failures, are beyond our control except to the extent that we maximize our own limited potential well-being through fierce competition and self interested activity.

Students, parents and teachers are almost certain to fail to see how competition is naturalized and made the norm within such constructions. Cooperation becomes a viable classroom activity only to the extent that students can be assured that they will "get their marks" for such activity. In such a world cooperation becomes the feared activity for a number of reasons. Weaker students may benefit from the cooperative activity, endangering the hard won positions of others in the class. Shared ideas might be explored and exploited later on by students, thus disrupting the "natural" processes of idea and expertise "ownership" within the class. Cooperation becomes the unimportant "add-on" to classroom activities in classes which are already filled brimming with work

which does "count." In these and other ways cooperation becomes "unnatural" and strange and competition stands strong.

School life is filled with procedures and techniques which support certain assumptions concerning the intransigent belief in "human nature." Among a host of others, vocational versus academic tracking, gifted and talented programs, "special education" classes, and reliance on IQ. tests all contribute to belief in the "naturalness" of unequal educational outcomes of children.

### **Shor on Lady Luck**

A second form of pre-scientific thought identified by Shor which obscures reality and absolves people from any responsibility for changing society is what he calls "lady luck." This belief system is based on assumptions that good things happen to bad people or bad things happen to good people, and so on, not because of the way society is structured but because of the "luck-of-the-draw." The rich and powerful are rich and powerful not because they are well-connected or come from powerful and privileged backgrounds or because they have exploited others in their maneuvers to the top, but because they "lucked out," their time "came up." In this "lottery of life" we can only hope that our number, too, will eventually come up so that we may share in the good life. Shor also points out the sexist nature of believing in "lady luck" which characterizes women and femaleness as unpredictable and without reason and mercy.

As notions of and belief in "lady luck" carry over into the school we can see ways in which school life is mystified and students' relation to change is weakened and obscured. It is easier to blame on luck the fact that so many students from middle and affluent backgrounds are in the "superior and gifted" programs and so many from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are in "special education" classrooms, than to make a critical analysis of relationships between socioeconomic class and school placement. The more someone is able to blame any outcome on luck, the less that person has to ask difficult questions concerning justice in educational systems or anywhere else. The more we relate good outcomes or bad outcomes to luck the less we become aware that people in certain positions, and with certain gender and race characteristics, get disproportionate shares of the good things that schools offer, at the expense of others.

### **Shor on brand-name loyalty**

Another form of pre-scientific irrationalism described by Shor is what he calls "brand-name loyalty." He characterizes this belief pattern as an almost sacred adherence to specific brand names and their inherent goodness without a critical appraisal of the real quality of these products. While Shor describes this belief pattern in terms of how much easier it is to have faith in a product rather than practice analytical reasoning, I believe the implications are more far reaching.

"Brand-name loyalty" is a remarkably potent force in the school world. There is pervasive belief among school students that if you have the right gear, the right magic labels and styles, you can get where you want to go. There is immense pressure on parents to supply their children with the right footwear, the right jeans, the right school supplies, the right personal computer. Of course, in our commodity saturated culture the list is endless. Students are aware that simply having the "right" Reebok Pump sneaker or the "right" Ralph Lauren clothing will not assure them a particular desired social status within the school world. Although insufficient, such commodities are, however, often seen as necessary trappings for certain kinds of school success. Students have been held up at gun point for their sunglasses and some have even died for their athletic shoes. In such horrific examples the luckiness of certain commodities is dubious and contradictory.

The mysterious power of certain brand names over others functions well with our commodity-glutted society, in which quality is no longer the criterion for excellence and the frenetic production of a myriad of socially essential but short lived products of style occupies our consumer appetites. Students grow up believing that if they can acquire enough of the right products they will have acquired some sort of security in their lives. This brand-name loyalty spills over into the choices students make in selecting one college or university over others, in a belief system which holds that future security is based on an institution's name rather than on the quality of education possible there.

While we can see that this kind of brand-name loyalty obscures critical rationality with its unquestioning valuing of labels over the quality of product, there is an undeniable power in the names of things. Going to the "right" colleges and universities does place people in particular relations of prestige and cultural capital. People in the United States and abroad are sensitized to commodity indicators of wealth and position. It does not matter that someone's BMW is constantly breaking down and in the shop, it will almost certainly be valued more highly than a dependable older model Ford or Chevy. Again society's belief in the magic of certain brand names over others lends the kind of power to the belief pattern which distances us from critically questioning the belief pattern itself. Again the constructed world appears more and more natural as we submit to the particular mental habit.

### **Shor on "common sense"**

A fourth form of pre-scientific thinking described by Shor is what he calls "common sense," a simultaneously constructive and destructive mode of public thought. Shor recognizes that it is common sense which brings us to practice everyday rules of survival but is more concerned with the kinds of common sense which people rely on when fleeing critical rationality in understanding the way things are and then the ways they might be. In both cases, Shor sees common sense as an "adjustment ideology" which keeps people from a mature grasp of reality.

In the schools common sense can explain away volumes of the irrational. Why is the school day fragmented into seven or so discreet and isolated parts? Why is there no real or substantial overlap between academic disciplines in school life? Why are students required to do work in school which has no relation their real lives, but is obviously "busy work" used to fill the day? Why are teachers and students not in more control over what happens in classroom practice? Why are schools places where we are taught what democracy is, and tested on it, rather than a place where we are encouraged to enact and explore democracy? All of the questions might be answered with an appeal to "common sense." If anyone has even minimal "common sense" they would not be asking these questions in the first place. The questions themselves show a lack of "common sense," of understanding what schools "are."

### **Shor on hero worship**

The last form of pre-scientific thought identified by Shor has to do with our own fears and experiences of inadequacy. Shor believes that our own perceived sense of powerlessness and inadequacy lead us to the mass practice of "hero-worship." Shor argues that as actors, athletes and other media personalities are accorded superstar status we lose any objective means to measure their talents. Shor connects this hero-worship and identification with heroes with the ways we have learned to understand ourselves as inadequate and self-doubting beings. If we can identify with someone who is entirely

acceptable and worthy of praise then we are less likely to question who we really are as people, especially in moral and political terms, or even to question how it is that we have come to experience ourselves as powerless and inadequate.

School life is rife with the processes of hero-worship. Music stars, film stars and sports stars student consciousness as students lumber from class to class fearing their own inadequacy and having their inadequacies pointed out to them with a relentless constancy. It is hard to imagine why students would even want to consider letting go of their identification with people who appear to have power over their own lives, who demonstrate at least the trappings of social and financial success in a world in which security and belonging are clearly elusive for the greatest majority of citizens.

### **Shor on "cultural spectatorism" and "beating the system"**

Shor connects reified consciousness and critical inactivity with what he describes as cultural spectatorism--ways of life which shrink from active responses and understandings of the surrounding world and, instead, approach the world passively and with an exhausted and bewildered pseudo-interest. Alienated from self and society, the spectator watches without critical reflection and response.

Reified culture achieves this disempowerment through related alienations: people are alienated from their own holistic habits of mind; people are alienated from their own class-peers, lacking the solidarity needed to organize for power; people are alienated from a grasp of the system's whole operation and the

mediating mechanisms which reproduce daily life. Alienated from power in class society, labor is also alienated from the power to think critically about gaining power. (Shor; 57)

And so mass culture experiences a vacuum of empowered experience which may be relieved by watching experiences of power beyond ourselves and alien from our own activity.

Shor describes cultural spectatorism as standing in the place of transformative cultural or political activity in this way:

Demobilized, masses of people are channeled into spectatorism: sports, television, movies, following the glamorous lives of film stars and jet-setters, being activated by experts, authorities and opinion-makers from the mass media. One spectator activity, "window-shopping," registers the routine reification of everyday life, where the alluring given order freezes transcendent action. (Shor; 57)

In such passive ways citizens of democracies can have "experiences" of activity, power and choice without ever becoming personally involved. The provisions of the commodity and media markets are expertly skilled at presenting spectator events so realistic and viscerally captivating that the spectators involved might enjoy more satisfaction through the spectacle than the experience.

School life is more and more characterizable by a spectator mentality. States across America are considering "video classrooms" in which glossy and slickly produced education "units" are sent throughout educational systems. "How can teachers compete with the entertainment quality of network and cable TV.?" educators ask.

Well, they cannot. So more and more alienating educational programs are advised to "capture" the attention of our nation's youth. This is only a single example among a host of other educational programs which can be characterized by their "spectator" appeal.

Shor describes another process of reified consciousness. Instead of being marked by inactivity on the part of the citizen, however, "beating the system" is a highly active form of mystification and provides an experience of power, although minimal, over monolithic and hard to understand advanced capitalist systems.

Several forces converge to propel the need for "beating the system": an affluent society with surplus goods piled everywhere, a consumerist culture manipulating high levels of material needs, a national life built on a dream of rising expectations, a class society where workers are paid less than they need to buy "the good life," and where corporate managers can engineer price inflation much easier than labor can negotiate wage increases. Mass life in such a commodity culture involves a search for bargains, short-cuts, deals, hot goods, fire sales, closeouts, markdowns, specials-of-the-day. This practice is a short term answer to the economic rigors of capitalist society without solving the root problem. It keeps people busily chiseling a higher standard of living out of an order supported by just such consumer activity. (Shor; 58-59)

Such "beating the system" behaviors are highly individualistic and competitive. While signifying a certain understanding that general prices are not "fair" prices, that expressed and explicit policies are not the "bottom line," a beating the system mentality is ultimately

contradictory because it does more to reinforce current economic and political injustices than to change them.

Likewise the school is a place where "the best and the brightest" are the most well-versed at beating the system in a world of limited teacher time, limited good grades and limited avenues to success. But what "success" can be accomplished through these means? Shor warns:

In this contradictory way, "beating the system" is a very active way to stay frozen in the system. It is a means to outsmart capitalism by playing within the rules of the business world. In the end you end up devoting huge amounts of time learning the ropes of the system, and none to rejecting the social model. You can do all this knowing that the rich control everything, that big business has the government in its pocket. You can know that landlords write property codes and that tax laws favor millionaires. These recognitions are not mobilized into combative class consciousness. The sense of powerlessness convinces you that the system can't be changed. (Shor: 59)

Similarly, awareness that the school system favors an elite group of students at the expense of others cannot be empowering so long as this awareness is enlisted in the competitive pursuit of limited school commodities--superior grades, teacher approval, honored athletic and social status, personal and academic autonomy and so on. I believe we must understand the activities of beating the system as necessarily colluding with and strengthening the system.

Shor describes how the processes of "beating the system" precludes democratic processes in the following passage:

"Beating the system" is an act of reified false consciousness in which you experience illusory power--a deal, a rip-off, getting more for your money. The power is illusory because you may or may not have needed the commodity in the first place, most likely it's a debased product anyhow, and no sooner have you clinched one deal than you're back in motion needing another. This social game retards political resistance to the system, but it also preserves a mental agility, a shrewd watchfulness in people. It forces thought to be narrow, immediate, and practical, thus crowding out critical thinking, but it does not destroy the capacity for critical thought. This form of consumerism is, however, a monstrous distraction to liberatory reflection, in a consumer culture where critical scrutiny offers no immediate material gains. When you play "beating the system," the carrot held out in front of you is the promise of some direct acquisition. In contrast, the practice of social reconstruction is obviously a long-term solution to daily problems; reified consciousness can look to an immediate reward from consumer life which thus interferes with the futurity of critical thought. (Shor; 59)

"Beating the system" is a game that never ends. As soon as we gain an understanding of one set of rules, another set of rules are required to achieve a similar outcome. Because a "beating the system" mentality contains elements of critical understanding of how the system works, it is easily mistaken for and stand in place of critical rationality. Such a mistake is dangerous. Beating the system is not a part of critical consciousness because it is, at core, nihilistic and without a vision of a transformed world.

## **Shor and critical cultural literacy**

For Shor we must remain highly suspicious of the current status of democratic practice today. People already have understandings of the non-democratic functioning of their lives.

The denial of democracy in everyday life is a general experience. People pay a price for talking back to parents, bosses, teachers, supervisors, cops, judges, landlords, credit-managers, and bureaucrats. Their superiors on the job are all appointed from the top, impervious to democratic discipline from below. At the same time people exercise virtually no power over the officials they elect . . . . Such a chaotic and polarized political situation--the few rulers over the divided and mystified people--encourages episodic as well as self-destructive rebellion. Periodically, and unpredictably, bottled up people explode. This can lead to wildcats as well as race riots, to sitdowns as well as looting sprees. The absence of democratic forms in daily life retards the development of organizational skills needed for sustained political resistance. The oppressed themselves are most endangered by uncritical swings from resignation to disorganized rebellion, yet this is precisely the eccentric behavior conditioned by authoritarian mass culture. (Shor; 71-72)

Through such a mystified and mystifying culture popular action is episodic, unfocused, and tends to maintain a disempowered and uncritical relationship to the world.

For Shor contemporary late industrial society is marked by very ambitious and busy forms of alienation. Citizens of such culture are not stupid and passive recipients of the dominant status quo but

instead, are actively involved in maneuvering towards some more favorable position in their individualistic quest for a secure life.

Alienated labor, and atomized social relations, do result in modes of thought and feeling too fragmented to organize popular liberation. Now, while people dominated by reification do not think critically, or make social change, or experiment with spacious artistic and sexual lives, they are not zombies, automatons or robots. They are very active, very busy. There is a bustling quality to daily life. The culture keeps people as busy as possible. They are energetic, amusing, aspiring. They shrewdly learn the rules and how to break them for personal profit. They become highly skilled in surviving situations which oppress them. They con bosses for raises, teachers for grades, cops for no ticket. One of the most energetic and paradoxical things people do is the game called "beating the system." (Shor; 58)

For Shor we might use the notion of "beating the system" as a way of understanding how a highly educated society stops short of the critical understanding of the world which might lead toward collective solidarity and action resulting in a genuinely more just and secure world. At the root of "beating the system" is a keen adherence to cults of individualism and competition.

Popular experiences of "freedom" and "democracy" for the majority of Americans have almost nothing to do with the critical reflection on social realities and their construction and then on the possible transformation of such realities. Instead, these popular experiences of "freedom" and "democracy" are more characterized by an isolated individualism related to a burgeoning consumer society or the reactionary social action described above. Shor juxtaposes a

critically informed political democracy with "cultural permissiveness" in this way:

Instead of electoral and extra-parliamentary democracy, "liberty" is experienced through consumerism, through feisty "bitching" on the job and in private life, and through the lack of traditional restrictions on behavior. "Freedom" is not the practice of democracy but rather the practice of shopping, casual complaining, and individualism, in a society which offers wide license for individualism. (Shor; xi)

Transformative and critical possibilities for Shor, however, are not far from view. "This recognition of 'cultural permissiveness' as a substitute for political democracy could help develop critical learning inside the myths and experiences of everyday life (Shor; xi)." But such recognitions, however close at hand, are not so easily achieved.

Shor is generally skeptical as to possibilities of critical thought in the public realm. The following passage relates his misgivings concerning the possibilities of mass culture:

Mass culture can no more permit critical thought than it can allow the practice of democracy. Both these activities threaten domination. They can develop in people an autonomy which would jar the class hierarchies underpinning American life. Social relations are over-organized so that people grow up rarely exercising self-discipline, self-organization, collective work styles, or group deliberation. In the family, in court, on the policed streets, at work, in church, in school, in unions, in voluntary associations, and in all the public and private institutions from Yankee Stadium to hospitals to unemployment offices, bureaucracy and hierarchy reign. A culture-wide addiction to and resentment of authority results. People become dependent on the very authority they despise. (Shor; 70)

This culture-wide suspicion and disdain for collective organization and political activity stand in the way of critical rationality and action.

Shor sees the challenging qualities inherent in any development and realization of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is by definition value laden and value sensitized and because of this threatens the status quo.

Critical consciousness is so absent from everyday living precisely because it is a threat to the routine behavior which supports the present society. The process of reconstructive learning fulfills a prophetic cliché--big things can grow from small beginnings, extraordinary changes can be provoked from the scrutiny of the ordinary features of mass life. Using mass culture against itself is the comic irony of liberatory education. (Shor; 233)

In a similar vein, using popular film texts as tools for critical literacy turns ordinarily "safe" artifacts of hegemonic popular culture upside down and inside out toward a more empowering view of the world that might lead to a more hopeful vision of how the world might be. By following the charge that there is a certain kind of hope in making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, educational workers will be threatening the status quo not only of their classrooms but of the larger school culture itself.

Shor also sees the reappropriation of cultural forms as a powerful tool toward uncovering the ways alienation and silence

have been constructed and institutionalized into almost all forms of contemporary life:

Because mass culture is the largest interference to critical thought, it makes sense for liberatory learning to use that culture against itself. This contradictory notion amounts to turning the problem into a source of solutions by studying the things which interfere with study. The critical orientation towards daily life does just that. It abstracts false consciousness so that students can reflect and transcend the ideas, language, behavior and institutions which limit them. (Shor; 241)

Shor is suggesting that as we experience confounding problems and contradictions in our schools, and every other sphere of our lives, we must steer into the storm: that it is within the storm that we may find more useful and significant understandings of the problems and questions we currently face, if not some answers and courses of transformative practice as well.

Such courageous educational activity destabilizes the status quo of classroom and other practices. New subject positions emerge, as they do for Freire, in a more critically and democracy based classroom. On democracy in the classroom as the practice of "dialogue." Shor writes:

When we practice dialogue, what withers or dissolves is not exactly the "teacher," but rather the authority dependence of the students, the authoritarian training of the teacher, and the ideology of a corporate society which socialized us into the myths and values needed to support inequality and a war economy. What replaces these conditioned habits is a camaraderie not yet of equals but moving in that economic

direction, in which the intellectual development of the teacher focuses inquiry without suffocating the creativity of the students. Thus liberating education is not a lecture on freedom, democracy of domination. It is an educational practice which disconfirms the unequal social relations dominant in society and in the classroom. (Shor; xii-xiii)

Such educational practice demands new and more relevant ways of approaching cultural understandings. The classroom necessarily becomes an arena for critically grounded cultural studies, an arena which is explicitly oriented toward unveiling and demystifying the kinds of mass consciousness which lead to disempowerment and alienation. Such classrooms are markedly different in both form and function from traditional market/commodity geared educational enterprises which characterize most contemporary educational sites.

Shor links the undoing of reified consciousness with an active valuing of Utopian thinking as related to people's everyday lived realities.

In regard to reification, the critical classroom can promote a democratic future in a number of ways. It can address future-denial in mass culture by focusing Utopian thought on immediate reality; it can make ordinary routines the subject of transcendent inquiry. (Shor; 60)

Part of what makes popular film texts so appropriate to such classroom activity is the value-laden character of all film as well as the way many popular films can be "read" in relation to particular Utopian sensibilities. Furthermore, Utopian thinking can be its own

exercise in democratic activity when it is something which is opened to broader public (classroom) inquiry and challenge.

Shor is hopeful in the final analysis, because he is committed to the latent critical ability of people who have been raised and function in mystifying monolithic cultures.

The building of a liberatory pedagogy begins from the facts of domination and social pressure. It is an enterprise supported by the refusal of teachers and students to surrender their humanity or their future. Beneath false consciousness, there are resources which survive the acidity of mass culture, waiting for a reconstructed life. (Shor; 87)

It is up to educational workers, teachers and counselors to become involved in processes of reawakening the foundations of critical consciousness within students' thinking and their own lives. The use of texts of popular culture toward such processes can be powerful and, perhaps, seminally transformative.

### **Michael Apple On Education And Power**

Michael Apple's analysis of schooling in late industrial capitalist America includes themes similar to those of Freire and Shor. Apple relates much of his argument and critique of the problems of late industrial capitalistic society to technical and administrative knowledge and the ways in which such knowledge constructions impact our personal and social consciousnesses. As we will see, Apple views cultural institutions, and for our purposes, most

importantly schools, as both reproducing certain cultural norms as well as producing new variants of cultural activity and knowledge.

Most importantly, Apple is committed to bringing strong critical theory into liberational practice. He states:

It is at the level of our daily lives where the cultural, political and economic spheres are lived out in all their complexity and contradictions, not just in the more removed are of high finance, federal government and the like (though these cannot be ignored). Theoretic analysis, though essential, cannot substitute for concrete work in all three spheres at that level. (Apple; 177)

This section will point out relationships between Apple's critical analysis of education and transformative possibilities of cultural studies.

### **Apple and institutionalized alienation within education**

Apple is concerned that most inquiry into educational practices is overly concerned with ways in which students might acquire more curricular knowledge. Such a focus simultaneously reinforces and affirms traditional banking models of educational practice and fails to address critically more political questions related to schooling. Apple's questions intentionally probe the nature of constructed knowledges and the relationships between schools and society as he asks:

Why and how are particular aspects of a collective culture represented in schools as objective factual knowledge? How, concretely, may official knowledge represent the ideological configurations of the dominant interests in a society? How do schools legitimate these limited and partial standards of knowing as unquestionable truths? (Apple; 19)

Apple rejects any depoliticization of structural inquiry into education on the grounds that such depoliticization ultimately obscures the value laden interests which are served through any educational activity.

In his analysis of the relationship of technology, Apple sees technical knowledge as a double edged sword--both empowering and disempowering. As a necessary part of an industrial society Apple distinguishes the form from the function of such knowledge processes.

Broadly speaking, technical knowledge is essential in a number of ways in any advanced industrial economy. The way it is employed in ours, though, is the critical factor. Given the enormous growth in the volume of production there has been a concomitant need for a rapid increase in the amount of technical and administrative information.(Apple; 47)

Essential to our understanding of the impact and processes of these forms of knowledge is an understanding that such administrative and technical knowledge has never been created in a moral vacuum and this is necessarily laden with certain values and interests. By beginning a critique of alienation and the schools with an awareness that these predominant modes of twentieth century knowing are

produced and organized in ways which benefit large corporate interests we are in a much better position to address current problems of "democracy" and "freedom."

For Apple, current processes in education follow current trends in capitalist production in remarkably corresponding, and yet significantly contradictory ways. He characterizes institutionalized alienation of workers from the meaningful modes of production as he describes the "deskilling" and "reskilling" of workers in everyday work life:

The skills they once had--skills of planning, of understanding and acting on an entire phase of production--are ultimately taken from them by management and housed elsewhere in a planning department controlled by management. In order for corporate accumulation to proceed, planning must be separated from execution, mental labor separated from manual labor, and in formal manner. The archetypal example of this is, of course, Taylorism and its many variants. In plain words, management the workplace must be 'taking the managers' brains from under the workman's cap. (Apple; 71)

Apple is echoing Shor's description of the separation of academic and vocational strands of secondary and tertiary education. More important, however, is Apple's recognition of the institutionalized character of this particular strand of alienated experience within the workplace--examples of which are found and carry throughout educational practice with the separations between planning and organizing parts of educational activity and the numbing and pointless school work foisted on the daily lives of students.

## **Apple and the interrelationship between alienation and democracy**

Apple is aware of the shrinking and diminishing experience of democratic activity in advanced capitalist societies. Apple argues that:

What Habermas calls the 'public sphere' is reduced to expressions of technical values, rules, procedures, and concerns. On an economic level, the uses to which this knowledge is put in our economy are part of the larger processes of accumulation and legitimation, as well as part of changing patterns of class relations. That this dynamic has remained relatively undertheorized is one of the major weaknesses in previous examinations of schools. (Apple; 168)

In fact, Apple argues that capital and democracy will increasingly come into tension with advanced industrial capitalist growth.

In its quest for efficiency, expert authority, rationalization, and increased discipline, capital may undermine the substance of democracy. As the Trilateral Commission document, **The Crisis of Democracy**, warned, there are all too many social dangers from an "excess of democracy." Extending the substance of democracy to the economic and cultural spheres, voting, does not necessarily serve capital. Capitalism and democracy, hence, may increasingly come into conflict.

This means that the defense of democracy, and its expansion into important aspects of our lives, is quite important both substantively and strategically. It can help unify the bulk of the population by uniting them around an historically pivotal theme in the United States and elsewhere. And it can begin to overcome, in the political sphere, the division of the working class into class fractions brought about by the productive arrangements in society. (Apple; 171)

## **Apple and possibilities within cultural studies and critical pedagogy**

These analyses of culture as comprising inherently contradictory dynamics, of cultural institutions, and particularly schools, which are neither entirely reproductive--as heavy-handed correspondence theories suggest--nor entirely productive, bring us to an understanding of cultural institutions as places of contest and struggle. Apple puts it this way:

Just as school is caught in contradictions that may be very difficult for it to resolve, so too are ideologies filled with contradictions. They are not coherent sets of beliefs. It is probably wrong to think of them as only beliefs at all. They are instead sets of lived meanings, practices, and social relations that are often internally inconsistent. They have elements within themselves that see through to the heart of the unequal benefits of a society and at one and the same time tend to hegemony of the dominant classes. Because of this ideologies are contested; they are continually struggled over. Since ideologies have both 'good' and 'bad' sense within them, people need to be won over to one side or another, if you will. Particular institutions become the sites where this struggle takes place and where these dominant ideologies are produced. The school is crucial as one of these sites. (Apple; 15)

But seeing education as a primarily reproductive culture misses the liberatory possibilities within any cultural group:

Rather than the labor process being totally controlled by management, rather than hard and fast structures of authority of punctuality and compliance, one sees a complex work culture. This very work culture provides important grounds

for worker resistance, collective action, informal control of pacing and skill, and reasserting one's humanity. . . . Men and women workers seem engaged in overt and informal activity that is missed when we talk only in reproductive terms.(Apple; 25)

By acknowledging that schools, and other work sites, are places where meanings and knowledge are produced, and not merely reproduced in the interests of existing dominant orders, we begin to understand schools as sites of genuine ideological struggle and contest. This understanding affirms schools, as well as all other work sites, as places of hope and of potential liberatory transformation.

Apple refers to Paul Willis' ethnographic study of working class school boys in Britain, *Learning to Labour*, as he continues to express democratic hope in contemporary culture.

[Willis] argues that even though the cultural and economic apparatus of an unequal society does have immense power to control the actions and consciousness of people, there are "deep disjunctions and desperate tensions within social and cultural reproduction." As he says, "Social agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures." (Apple; 97)

Instead, Apple urges us to own creative abilities as we struggle to more critically understand the processes of our own social formation:

[The] act of reading our social formation differently is a creative act. It requires that we consciously bracket what we take for granted about schools, media, government, and economic institutions work. At the same time, it requires that

we recognize how and in what form unequal power manifests itself. Who benefits from current relations in and among these institutions? In order to understand this we need to take the position of those who are culturally, politically, or economically disenfranchised or oppressed, or who during the current conservative restoration are losing what they had spent so many years trying to gain. (Apple; viii)

Apple sees transformational possibilities developing critical literacy in students. Critical reading, he argues, must be done with the intention of dislodging our traditional association and identification with the dominant elements of any particular text. Quoting the critical work of Elizabeth Ellsworth, Apple encourages a strategy which:

offers 'readers the means by which they can actively and forcefully reposition themselves in relation to the text, to refuse the point of view of [dominant groups] . . . and read the text instead from the political position of the oppressed . . ."  
(Ellsworth in Apple; viii)

Through such a repositioning of the reader in relation to the text, the reader becomes involved in a process of confronting taken -for-granted social practices and assumptions.

And from Richard Edwards Apple reminds that we must be committed to the hope involved in active democratic processes. Democracy cannot be seen as a given luxury of our society, but must be seen as something we create in socially meaningful ways and which challenges the current material positions of our world:

The defense of democracy thus entails a demand for its application at all levels and in all spheres of society. This is a central point, for here emerges the central theme of all socialist programs: the defense of political democracy is simply the logical corollary to the demand for democracy at the workplace and social control of the production process. Once workers raise a challenge to the existing system of control in the firm, they will through their experiences be led to see the common content in these struggles. The defense and extension of democracy may ultimately rest, then, on the working class's effort to [reorganize and democratize] the means of production and to organize, through democratic rule, society's material resources for the benefit of all in society. (Edwards in Apple; 172)

Finally, Apple insists that personal agency is at the root of our human abilities to transform our world into a more just and equitable place.

If we do have agency--as I have insisted throughout. . . --then transformation is possible. As we become less reductionistic and less mechanistic, important changes in our theories are indeed going on. Logically and politically, however, these changes entail a practice. The socio-economic and cultural realities [confronting us] can only be altered if we take that practice seriously. (Apple; 177)

It is from the charges of Freire, Shor and Apple that our theoretical critique of contemporary constructions of alienation and corresponding collapsed democratic spheres might find transformative power only to the extent that we construct critical practices which address and confront such realities. For each of these three educational workers it is at the level of cultural study

and investigation that we might begin to develop active critical consciousness dialogue within school cultures and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen from the above discussions of part of their work, Freire, Shor and Apple all see democratic hope and possibility within processes of reappropriating and critically reading and rereading texts and events of popular culture. Each of their work contributes to understanding and developing different and related dimensions of the interrelationships between schools, the culture from which they emerge and in which they are embedded.

We now turn to an investigation of the ways in which texts of popular culture, and especially popular film texts might be used in transformative pedagogical activity and practice.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### POPULAR CULTURE AND POPULAR FILM AS SOURCES FOR POTENTIALLY CRITICAL TEXTS

Late industrial societies are not organized around the same patterns of social control as was the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Forms of social control and standardization have emerged and thrived with and through new and expanding technologies of media and information exchange. And, as has been established in previous chapters, insidious forms of alienation have continued to develop along with a corresponding decline in places for people to come together for transformative political debate and discussion.

Some of the most influential spheres of social influence and hegemonic control at the global level are in the context of mass expressions of popular culture. Furthermore, and as we will see in greater detail though this chapter, expressions of popular culture cannot be seen as isolated objects of our larger culture or merely as isolated parts of a larger cultural superstructure. Instead, the processes and dynamics of popular culture must be seen and understood as integrally related to ways in which people produce different kinds of meaning and knowledge in their lives. As we shall see, texts of popular culture must be seen as integrally interwoven in

our daily pedagogic experience and, as such, are an essential realm of exploration, inquiry and debate in any emancipatory pedagogy.

In addressing the ways in which texts of popular culture are impacting the lives of people on an ever more global scale, Paul Smith speaks to a dynamic of a new world order in which consciousness is closely linked to the growth and spread of different kinds of texts of popular culture. Smith states:

In the industrial and postindustrial countries of the First World, cultural objects and artifacts are not only the commodity productions of our given historical phase of capitalism, but equally and always they have become the game pieces in a rapidly increasing and increasingly rapid miscegenation of global cultures. While it is probably the case that cultural objects are currently commodified as never before, it is equally true that the living cultures in which these objects circulate are ever more fragmented at the level of consumption, while at the same time they are ever more unified at the level of production. The circuits of capital, in other words, extend ever further and faster in global terms, but even as they do so they create the most fragmented conditions wherever they reach. Countries and peoples in both the North and the South confront everyday in the most extreme terms the cultural gap between their lived conditions and their histories and traditions, on the one hand, and on the other the demands of a global capitalist network of production and circulation which in its hegemonic success renders old-style territorial imperialism unnecessary. (Smith: 32)

Smith presents a world whose current experiences and growth of alienation and fragmentation occur largely in relation to ways in which images and messages of popular culture contradict and destabilize the lived experiences of people wherever these texts

reach. Smith is also making direct links between people's consciousness and the texts and objects of popular consumption within their reach.

Expressions of popular culture present a world of comparison for whoever might consume them. Within every text of popular culture a certain kind of moral universe is presented. Through any such text we are presented with particular constructions of beauty and ugliness, good and evil, strength and weakness. Popular culture texts, from cola commercials to mainstream film features to sporting magazines, present us with moral patterns and tales so that we learn certain "acceptable" and "appropriate" patterns of belief and behavior. And from these texts we also learn what is not acceptable and what is not appropriate for us to do and believe. Though we seldom acknowledge this power, popular culture texts provide loud and penetrating political messages and subject positions for their consumers. What is striking, and what I hope brings us increasing alarm, is how little such popular culture finds its way into school classrooms for investigation, study, and discussion.

This chapter is about locating pedagogical theory and practice within the context of popular culture studies. Throughout this chapter the interrelationships between popular culture and emancipatory educational practice are explored and challenged. Further, this chapter addresses ways in which popular film texts might be useful toward more emancipatory pedagogical practice, practices which are fundamentally about opening up public spheres of discourse and eroding the battlements of alienation and isolation

in mass culture at the core of much of our world's unnecessary suffering.

In their introduction to **Popular Culture: Schooling and Everyday Life**, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux warn against current trends in educational language and practice as being organized around technical and procedural skills acquisition. As we have seen in earlier chapters, these educational and pedagogical practices most often stand unchallenged and unquestioned. These bodies of technical and procedural information are most frequently handed down from educators to their students in an antivisionary form which is most preclusive of any emancipatory pedagogical practice. Such patterns of pedagogy marginalize critical literacy and understanding, if not make them impossible and continue to erode an already marginalized and ailing public sphere in education today. On such limited language in education Freire and Giroux state:

This is a language that ignores its own partiality, that refuses to engage the ideological assumptions that underlie its vision of the future, and that appears unable to understand its own complicity with those social relations that subjugate, infantilize, and corrupt. It is a language that in its quest for control, certainty, and objectivity cannot link leadership to notions of solidarity, community, or public life. It is a language that reduces administrators, teachers, and students to clerks and bad theorists, that removes schools from their most vital connections to public life, and that more often than not defines teaching in instrumental rather than enabling terms. It deskills teachers and disempowers students while purporting to empower them. (Freire & Giroux; viii)

In contrast to these current trends in educational language, Freire and Giroux advocate a reformed educational theory and practice which contribute to an empowering and more open public realm:

At its best, the language of educational theory should embody a public philosophy dedicated to returning schools to their primary task: to be places of critical education in the service of creating a sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their own lives, and especially over the conditions of knowledge production and acquisition. This is a language linked to the imperatives of a practical hope, one that views the relationship between leadership and schooling as part of the wider struggle to create the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority. (Freire & Giroux; viii)

Freire's and Giroux's vision for a new language of educational theory and practice demands that we let go of certain processes of alienation, isolation and voicelessness which keep us from our own deliberate and mindful knowledge acquisition and production. Also explicit within their work is an open-sighted hopefulness which refuses to despair in the face of the firmly established systems which currently found contemporary educational and other social practice. Freire and Giroux, along with most all the other critical educators we have been discussing in the previous chapters, are hungry for a radical democracy, a democracy in which people from a great variety of experiences, agendas and subjectivities can come together in some substantial ways to actively create a world in which it is more worth living for all involved.

Central to all such work are educational experiences and challenges which enable students, and teachers as well, to understand the ways in which power and knowledge come together in all social spheres and especially educational spheres to either silence or encourage the voices of particular individuals--students, teachers, administrators, and so forth--over the voices of others.

It is important that we recognize such work as simultaneously reflective and reflexive in character. By "reflective" I mean being aware of our selves in the world and in relation to others. This, I understand, is the first criteria for any moral awareness or choice. By "reflexive" I mean becoming evermore aware of how we come to organize our understanding and knowledge of our own self awareness. Reflexion might most simply be stated as "reflecting on reflecting." It is this reflexion which I believe is central to any critical and emancipatory practice in the world because with such reflecting on our reflecting we can begin to see patterns of how our own particular versions and visions of the world are constructed; only then can we begin to envision and construct alternative visions and versions of reality. This is a qualitatively significant shift in relation to current educational trends, which are almost entirely objective and only sometimes require of students that they see themselves in relationship to their world.

A pedagogy which is both essentially reflective and reflexive in character is about disrupting alienating educational structures. What I am arguing, and what I understand Freire and Giroux among others to be advocating, is that an education oriented toward critical

citizenry must be about a much larger public sphere, a sphere in which challenging and increasingly well-informed communication and debate become the standard in schools and beyond. Such a public sphere will find some of its richest challenge from expressions of popular culture and from our daily lives, and will enjoin people in purposeful discourse and conversation beyond the abstract and soulless discussions which plague much of our current academic and political world--and even much of what we have learned to call the "democratic process."

Educating within a vision of justice and democracy fosters a radical kind of lived plurality. Freire and Giroux call for a balance between modernist and postmodernist concerns towards such a pedagogy of plurality and democracy:

The modernist concern with enlightened subjects, coupled with the postmodernist emphasis on the particular, the heterogeneous, and the multiple, points to educating students for a type of citizenship that does not separate abstract rights from the realm of the everyday and does not define community as the legitimating and unifying practice of a one-dimensional cultural narrative. The postmodern emphasis on refusing forms of knowledge and pedagogy wrapped in the legitimating claims of universal reason, its refusal of narratives that disclaim their own partiality, and its opposition to all analyses that treat culture as an artifact rather than a social and historical construction provide the pedagogical grounds for radicalizing the emancipatory possibilities of teaching and learning. (Freire & Giroux; xii)

An engaged plurality within a democratic and emancipatory community, then, becomes possible as more and more narratives of

struggle, meaning, and being are voiced and brought into larger webs of conversation, understanding, and challenge. Such a plurality of voice and conversation demands that we see cultural phenomena as socially constructed with particular historically situated interests; in so doing we avoid reproduction theories which have a limited and limiting notion of human possibility in the creation of a more just world.

Henry Giroux and Roger Simon are concerned that most theory and practice in critical education ignore the notion that pedagogy is social and cultural production and communication in itself. They hold, as I believe we must, that pedagogy must be reconceptualized as a way of addressing how knowledge is produced, amplified, silenced and represented within particular power relations. They state the problem of certain trends of critical educational theory in this way:

Within critical educational theories the issue of pedagogy is usually treated in one of two ways: as a method whose status is defined by its functional relation to particular forms of knowledge or as a process of ideological deconstruction of a text. In the first approach, close attention is given to the knowledge chosen for use in a particular class. Often the ways in which students engage such knowledge is taken for granted. It is assumed that if one has access to an ideologically correct comprehension of that which is to be understood, the only serious question that needs to be raised about pedagogy is one of procedural technique, that is, should one use a seminar, lecture, or some other teaching style? In the second approach, pedagogy is reduced to a concern with, and analysis of the political interests which structure particular forms of knowledge, ways of knowing, and methods of teaching. For example, specific styles of teaching might be analyzed

according to whether or not they embody sexist, racist, and class-specific interests, serve to silence students, or promote practices which deskill and disempower teachers. (Giroux & Simon; 2)

Giroux and Simon are asking that critical educators be aware not only of addressing and assessing ideological soundness of classroom content and of the social construction of patterns of oppression within modes of educational practice but also of the ways students actively construct patterns of meaning and understanding before they come into the classroom.

This emphasis on the ways in which students come into classroom life with certain ethical and political ways of being requires that teachers become attuned to much more than formal issues of justice and injustice and, furthermore, makes processes of deconstructing classroom and other cultural practices all the more challenging. Again, issues of ideological significance and soundness as well as the deconstruction of both the form and content of educational activity are essential, but ultimately insufficient, qualities of any critical pedagogy. Giroux and Simon argue that the subjectivities of the students, the moral and political codes and activities they bring into the classroom within these subjectivities are essential to any emancipatory pedagogy. Furthermore, it is only through inviting, discovering, valuing, encouraging, and exploring personal subjectivities that we can more substantively address how certain knowledge is produced, by whom, and in whose interests.

Giroux and Simon value the use of popular culture for the very reason that it helps educators to understand how their students are morally and politically involved in their everyday lives so that, we are to assume, the gulf between everyday life and school life may be bridged in some significant ways, and that through this bridging a more emancipatory educational practice may find genesis.

The value of including popular culture in the development of a critical pedagogy is that it provides the opportunity to further our understanding of how students make investments in particular social forms and practices. In other words, the study of popular culture offers the possibility of understanding how a politics of pleasure addresses students in a way that shapes and sometimes secures the often-contradictory relations they have to both schooling and the politics of everyday life. (Giroux & Simon: 3)

The goal of understanding the moral and political subjectivities of students seems to be an essential element of a critical pedagogy. I am seeking, in addition to ways of understanding students' subjective experiences and personal ethical and political contexts and activities, ways in which new dialogues are possible and how these dialogues may be guided and facilitated through the use of popular film texts. Before exploring how some of these goals may be achieved in educational practice, it is important to explore some of the discussion which surrounds popular culture and education.

## Popular Culture And Educational Practice

In their article *A Pedagogy of Pleasure and Meaning* Henry Giroux and Roger Simon present a concise and useful overview of the place of popular culture with regard to two positions from the Left and one position from the Right. They then raise issues of Gramscian notions of hegemony and how the popular is involved in emancipatory or repressive forms of ethical and political consent. The following is an overview of this presentation.

Giroux and Simon hold that popular culture has not held a valued position within either the Left or the Right. In the first of two positions from the Left popular culture is seen as produced from the top, the culture industry, and imposed on the masses:

Within this discourse, popular culture becomes commodified and produces people in the image of its own logic, a logic characterized by standardization, uniformity and passivity. The structuring principle at work in this view of popular culture is one of total domination and utter resignation. People become synonymous with cultural dupes, incapable of either mediating, resisting, or rejecting the imperatives of the dominant culture. (Giroux & Simon: 4)

Giroux and Simon attribute this view to the Frankfurt School thinkers Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Within such a view all mass culture leads to anti-enlightenment and continued fettering of our consciousness by the dominant culture. It is, then as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, only in the world of high culture that autonomy, reason, creativity, and freedom can be reconceptualized and brought

into practice. Giroux and Simon are suspicious of this retreat to the possibilities of high culture and, without addressing the difficulty faced by the common masses who might wish to break into this hallowed realm, they reject this position on the grounds that it fails to take into account the very real terrains of struggle and dissent which are the hallmarks of much of popular culture as well as the transformative power that such struggle and dissent might have on the dominant culture.

The second view of popular culture from the Left which Giroux and Simon present maintains a particular Marxian understanding of popular culture which has emerged from the work of certain anthropologists and social historians. Within this particular Marxist construction popular culture becomes a sentimental "people's culture" which is held as essentialist and non-dynamic. In this version:

Popular culture becomes a version of folk culture and its contemporary variant, that is, as an object of historical analysis, working-class culture is excavated as an unsullied expression of popular resistance. Within this form of analysis the political and the pedagogical emerge as an attempt to reconstruct a 'radical and . . . popular tradition in order that the people might learn from and take heart from the struggles of their forbears.' (Giroux & Simon: 5)

A similar form of this view is presented in which popular culture is seen as "the culture of authenticity," a culture which is immune from "contamination" by the larger culture industry or even of the

dominant culture itself. Giroux and Simon are also quick to reject such a notion of the popular.

This view falls prey to an essentialist reading of popular culture. It deeply underestimates the most central feature of cultural power in the twentieth century. In failing to acknowledge popular culture as one sphere in a complex field of domination and subordination, this view ignores the necessity of providing an understanding of how power produces different levels of cultural relations, experiences, and values that articulate the multilayered ideologies and social practices of any society. (Giroux & Simon: 6)

Again, we must reject this view of popular culture for the very reason that popular culture, in this sense, is seen as removed and remote from all other cultural forces and also because culture is represented in a static, non-dynamic way.

From the far Right a view of popular and mass culture is somewhat related to that of Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt school. Within this view expressions of popular culture help to perpetuate a mental and spiritual wasteland in all those lives upon which they bear. Alan Bloom in **The Closing of the American Mind** describe popular culture as a "nonstop commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy" which encourages an escapism of the most dangerous kind (In Giroux and Simon: 6). As with Adorno and Horkheimer, an absolute distinction is explicitly made between popular culture and high culture; and while the agendas of Left and Right are quite different, the notion that high culture is the only real sphere of enlightened and/or transformative inquiry and

action is decidedly absolute in both these political camps. Giroux and Simon argue:

Knowledge in this perspective becomes sacred, revered, and removed from the demands of social critique and ideological interests. The pedagogical principles here are similar to those at work in the Left's celebration of high culture. In both cases, the rhetoric of cultural restoration and crisis legitimates a transmission pedagogy consistent with a view of culture as an artifact and students as merely bearers of received knowledge. (Giroux & Simon: 7)

Furthermore, such views of popular culture overlook the dynamic qualities of popular cultural expression and its resonance throughout various communities. These views of popular culture fail to acknowledge the potential and real power of any pervasive cultural sphere of expression and communication.

Before continuing, it is important to recount some of the important qualities of popular culture which the previous arguments assume.

- 1) Popular culture is dynamic and is related to various structures of power, of domination and subordination, of who is entitled to voice and who is not.
- 2) Popular culture is at least as important a sphere for critical inquiry as any other cultural expression and, furthermore, to reject the power of popular culture on the grounds that it is inferior to "high" culture contributes to a dangerous elitism which overlooks its potential as a source for deeper cultural understanding or even emancipatory transformation.

3) Popular culture is not somehow magically and timelessly disconnected from the dominant culture, and such a view will lead to a simplistic understanding of the possibilities and limitations of popular culture.

4) Popular culture can be seen neither as being generated from above nor as spontaneously emerging from below. Instead it may be much more helpful to view popular culture as a contradictory sphere in which the interests of dominant groups and the voices of disparate and subordinated groups come together in complex and contradictory ways.

In response to the views of popular culture presented from the Left and Right, Giroux and Simon introduce the work of Italian cultural thinker Antonio Gramsci and particularly his notion of hegemony as it relates to popular culture. While they comment that Gramsci never articulated a formal account of popular cultural forms in early twentieth century Europe, they credit Gramsci with constructing an original theory of culture, power relations, and hegemony which moves beyond the "impasse of viewing popular culture within the bi-polar alternatives of a celebratory popularism or a debilitating cultural stupor (Giroux & Simon: 8)." While it is beyond the scope of this work to address the content and significance of Gramsci's work in cultural studies, a short discussion of some his work is essential in linking culture studies to pedagogical practice.

For Gramsci, hegemony is the struggle to win the behavioral and attitudinal consent of oppressed and subordinate groups to the views and agenda of the dominant groups within any society.

Hegemony is a way of understanding why people act against their own best interests without the use of totalitarian force and/or overt control. Such consent takes place, Gramsci argues, from within the ranks of subordinate groups and often against their best interests and in favor of the interests of the dominant groups. This happens in complex ways through the pedagogical processes of everyday life and experience. These pedagogical processes are ongoing and dynamic and serve to legitimate both the authority and interests of the dominant culture. Giroux and Simon argue:

Moral leadership and state power are tied to a process of consent, as a form of practical learning, which is secured through the elaboration of particular discourses, needs, appeals, values, and interests that must address and transform the concerns of subordinate groups. In this perspective hegemony is a continuing, shifting, and problematic historical process. Consent is structured through a series of relations marked by an ongoing political struggle over competing conceptions and views of the world between dominant and subordinate groups. . . . By claiming that every relation of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship, Gramsci makes clear that a ruling bloc can only engage in political and pedagogical struggle for the consent of subordinate groups if it is willing to take seriously and articulate some of the values and interests of these groups. (Giroux & Simon: 8)

The corresponding implications for addressing popular culture as a tool for creating a more just and democratic world are significant and profound.

First, the understanding that people learn to submit to oppression and commit their own oppression on a cultural terrain

makes the study of cultural dynamics, one important sphere of which is popular culture, an essential ingredient for any transformative pedagogy or political activity. Hope for a more caring and just world exists, in part, by acknowledging that we collude in our own oppression and in the oppression of others, especially in insidiously unwitting ways. It is through exploring the dynamics of such "hegemonic entrapment" that we may be in an improved position to change certain conditions of our lives.

Second, the understanding of hegemonic consent occurring as part of everyday pedagogical processes within all cultural experience destroys the artificial barrier between what goes on in school life and what goes on in everyday life outside of school. With this false distinction between school life and "real" life out of the way, the study and understanding of popular culture becomes appropriate, perhaps even essential, both from within school and from without. The study of popular culture can no longer be described as having no place in the school and must be seen as a very real terrain on which the quality of life of students is contested and set.

Third, since any effective hegemonizing process not only takes into account the values and political agenda of the dominant group but also articulates the values and interests of subordinate groups and inscribes all these groups with particular processes and dynamics of power, education can never be seen as value-neutral or apolitical. On the contrary, any responsible educational community will be involved in uncovering, addressing, and challenging moral and political issues, activities and experience.

Fourth, by understanding that all human lived experience is bound by pedagogical processes, the study and understanding of pedagogy becomes an essential objective and activity of any informed citizenry. And, because such pedagogical processes are intimately tied to issues of power and knowledge, any reflective and reflexive pedagogy must address and question the construction of different forms of power and knowledge and how they are related to other such forms.

Fifth, since the objects of popular culture contain within them certain of the values and interests of subordinate groups, these texts of popular culture can be read in such a way as to illuminate and explore the desires and interests of subordinate groups. Furthermore, since these popular culture texts are constructed in ways which take away the power of these desires and interests, rendering them less disruptive to the interests of the dominant culture, these texts can be read to reveal how the desires, values, and morals of subordinate groups are silenced and disempowered.

For educators, once these understandings can be accomplished within the school culture, the appropriateness and necessity of popular culture studies in all classrooms should be apparent. Schools and educational communities unwilling to address such issues seriously can be understood, at best, to rest with their heads in the sand as they silently collude with the oppressive practices of the larger dominant culture. At worst, such cultures can be seen as dangerous and to be avoided at all costs for the damage they will do

in the lives of their students, teachers, and related community members.

### **Popular Culture In The Classroom**

Popular culture can be seen as having a particularly important place in the lives of students. As stated earlier, Giroux and Simon maintain that popular cultural studies are pedagogically important because such studies may be able to extend our critical pedagogical activity beyond the work of ideological investigation and judgment and deconstruction of the various forms of our educational practice, and into the realm of students' own subjectivities--into their particular modes of moral and political inscription and practice as they come into the school world.

Before going on to explore some of the issues concerning the use of popular culture in the classroom it is important that we begin to be sensitized to the ways in which popular culture impact the lives of students. Stanley Aronowitz has written:

If Althusser claims that the school is the chief ideological state apparatus, this may hold for the production of the symbolic system, the constellation of signs and codes of which what counts as reliable knowledge is constructed; but the mass media construct the social imaginary, the place where kids situate themselves in their emotional life, where the future appears as a narration of possibilities as well as limits.  
(Aronowitz: 199)

As Aronowitz writes about the "social imaginary" of students being

constructed through varying forms of the mass media he invites us to understand the relationship between students and popular culture texts as a negotiation of possibilities and limits in their lives. It is the space in between the student and the text which is of utmost importance. This is the negotiated space, the space which is marked by both the past experiences of the student and the particular presentation, the commissions and omissions, of the text.

By rethinking educational activity as not merely the reading of texts, or of certain bodies of "real" and transhistorical knowledge by a student body and, instead, seeing the school as a site for reading the relationships between texts and the lives of students a new kind of hope and possibility might begin to emerge.

Paul Smith talks about the popular-cultural-commodity-text or PCCTs and how they are used in different kinds of classroom contexts in his article *Pedagogy and the Popular-Cultural-Commodity-Text*. Smith argues for a reconceptualization of the popular as something far more powerful and dynamic than objects which simply serve the reproduction of false consciousness. As do Giroux and Simon, Smith rejects views from the Left that popular cultural forms have some overwhelming and magical ideological force over human subjectivities which can be neither resisted nor experienced in contradictory ways.

For Smith, this understanding of popular culture as contradictory and having problematical ideological impact on people's lived experience reduces popular culture from the realm of "an omnipotent ideological command" and recontextualizes objects of

popular culture as texts which can be read by a subject--a reading which exhibits a negotiated tension between the subject's experience and the "demands, suggestion, or implications of the text (Smith; 33)." At the same time Smith wants us to realize that these texts are commodities:

At the same time, it is important not to try to deny or disregard the text's provenance: cultural objects, cultural texts, are still nonetheless commodities which will attempt to situate the subject in some preferred relation to them. Even if we resist a text, we still consume it and thus enter into a given relation to it. The artifacts and objects produced for us by capital must then be seen simultaneously as sites of our interaction and as objects for which we are consumers: they are popular-cultural-commodity-texts (PCCTs). (Smith: 33)

Unfortunately, Smith argues, even when texts of popular culture are used in the classroom, and it is relatively rare that they are, they are seldom used in any critical way. Instead, he sees these texts being used by teachers as bargaining devices with their students or as substitutes for the standard curricular canon. In such instances texts of popular culture are not addressed for their peculiar strength and power within the culture or for understanding how students come to be involved in particular inscriptions of knowledge and power.

One of Smith's greatest concerns in using texts of popular culture in the classroom is in using these texts merely as a means to endorse and celebrate the student's own subjective experience in a primarily relative, individualistic, and anti-critical way. Smith recalls work with texts of popular culture from the 1960's onward in

which these texts were seen as the only cultural experiences that would resonate with students, the only cultural experiences accessible for students; and so they were used in place of canonical curricular material to encourage student self-expression and consciousness. Smith argues:

In the process, so the argument goes, students will see their own experiences reflected and thus be more satisfied with the classroom experience than if they were taught canonical texts. (Smith: 33-34)

We must be suspicious and finally reject such a marketing approach to education for repackaging the same old silencing and disempowering educational practices in some more flashy or appealing format. I do not believe that any educator is not drawn to such repackaging practices, however, as we compete for student attention against shinier, highly produced, and pleasure filled presentations from outside the classroom.

Smith goes on to criticize the use of popular texts in relativistic and noncritical ways:

[This type of practice] tends to encourage the unwarranted validation of individual experience and thence often leads, via relativism, towards a kind of cultural quietism: the students' supposed propinquity to what might be called the cultural ethos of such texts allows them to assume that their understanding or interpretation of the texts is as sufficient as the next person's. If that were the case, then nothing need be done: the subjective reception of the text is adequate, can be celebrated as somehow an authentic response, and--more disturbing--leaves the individual student's response stunted

and isolated in relation to even the most pressing social issues.  
(Smith: 34)

Smith is not trying to invalidate the importance of encouraging the subjective responses of students in a critical classroom. Instead, he is concerned that all too often the encouraging of subjective responses, of student voice, has become an end in itself. And, as an end in itself, such pedagogical activity in the classroom ends in an uncritical celebration of the individual.

I believe that such practice even leads the student into an even more disempowered position than before the production of students' subjective responses in relation to popular culture texts. By encouraging such relative and noncritical responses from students, these students are left even more remote and on their own than before. They may learn how to more freely express their reactions and responses to the texts in question, but from here a disturbing form of hidden curriculum is activated. As student responses are encouraged and supported by the teacher, and possibly the other students, in a wholesale celebration, they learn that such responses have, no matter their moral, ethical, and political content, no relative place in relation to any other view or group of views. So, in this kind of "celebration of student voice," students are taught that their construction and subjective experience of the world is of no real value, they learn that it is somehow "good" and desirable to have a voice, but that this voice really does not matter at all. Such uses of popular culture texts might even be more dangerous to the political

and social abilities of students than if they were only subjected to a standard transmission pedagogy. In the end, I believe that such educational practice leaves students all the more alienated and silenced and with an even more keen awareness that what they might have to contribute to the classroom community is not valued at all.

On using texts of popular culture in the classroom Smith offers three pedagogical suggestions:

First, that the PCCT can best be taught only within the framework, or scaffolding, of a clearly articulated pedagogical theory; second, that the role of the teacher in the classroom cannot be reduced to that of an empty sounding-board for students' reactions but must be seen as something more akin to that of an orchestrator; and third, that both the pedagogical theory and the practice of text analysis should together be geared toward some substantive goal or telos. (Smith: 42)

These three goals elevate classroom pedagogical practice far beyond that of a transmission pedagogy. Such educational practice is grounded in very particular theoretical assumptions and demands that all participants within this pedagogy be aware of these theoretical frameworks. Such educational activity is necessarily both reflective and reflexive. The teacher is elevated from a disempowered position of transmitter of a rigid curricular canon and becomes a person involved in the construction and understanding of different forms of knowledge and power from both within the classroom and without. Simon's third goal demands that educational

practice be utopian in character, that all educational activity be grounded in the vision of a better and more caring world.

From this position, Smith holds that students must come to appreciate and challenge each text of popular culture as a commodity. He wants students to ask how is a particular popular text or experience purchased. Who is able to afford such a text. Who benefits from the sale of this commodity. The important questions in this category can continue on. Through such discussions Smith intends that students will see the texts as commodities and as not existing somehow free floating in the world. Furthermore, he has the goal that such dialogue will help students create a new relationship to such texts, that students might begin to develop:

a sense of the central position and role of a PCCT in constructing, upholding, or perhaps even resisting a context of interests which students will no longer automatically accept as identical to the interests of their own lived culture (Smith: 35).

Smith believes that the popular culture text can also best be used as an instrument for opening up contradictions between the popular text and students' views. Smith does not believe that the pedagogical goal should be the resolution of these contradictions; instead, he sees these contradictions as important in a critical pedagogy for the very reason that they are not easily resolved or deciphered. The pedagogical power rests in the challenges, social, moral and political, that these texts present when these are seen as meaningful and significant. Although Smith does not tell us this, for

the student such readings become significant as they stand in relation to all other readings and experiences within the group. When the popular text is valued as having social, moral, and political meaning and significance, the responses of students have corresponding significance. Neutrality is forfeited in such discussions as positions and responses are contextualized within relationships to the social, moral, and historical parameters outside and within the text.

In a similar vein, but closer to how students' and teachers' subjectivities are involved in educational practice, Giroux writes of a "critical representational pedagogy" in addressing the ways certain narrations become intimately connected to people's real lives. Such work is visionary in that issues of past and present are used in constructing at least a vision of a more just and meaningful future. Giroux's representational pedagogy is about digging into and disrupting patterns and processes of hegemonic consciousness through such pedagogical means. He writes:

I am referring to the various ways in which representations are constructed as a means of comprehending the past through the present in order to legitimate and secure a particular view of the future. How students can come to interrogate the historical, semiotic, and relational dynamics involved in various regimes of representations and their respective politics. In other words, a pedagogy of representation focuses on the demystifying the act and processes of representing by revealing how meanings are produced within relations of power that narrate identities through history, social forms and modes of address that appear objective, universally valid and consensual. At issue here is the task of both identifying how representational politics work to secure dominant modes of

authority and mobilize popular support while also interrogating how the act of presenting is developed within forms of textual authority and relations of power "which always involve choice, selectivity, exclusions, and inclusions."

Central to a pedagogy of representation is providing students with the opportunities to deconstruct mythic notions that images, sounds and texts merely express reality. More specifically, a critical pedagogy of representation recognizes that students inhabit a photocentric, aural and televisual culture in which the proliferation of photographic and electronically produced images and sounds serve to actively produce knowledge and identities within certain sets of ideological and social practices. Giroux: 19)

Central to such a critical pedagogy of representation for Giroux, then, is deconstructing and demystifying the ways in which knowledge and meaning are constructed in people's lives through their experience and relationship with the form and content of texts of popular culture. Such a pedagogy demands that we see popular culture texts as not merely expressing reality but as expressing a specially constructed fiction of reality that has particular resonance and pleasure for its consumers. Giroux's critical pedagogy of representation is also about bringing students into a more active and dynamic relationship to the choices they have in their lives and how such choices are connected to positions of power and knowledge.

## Using Popular Film In A Sociology Of Education Course Context

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner in their introduction to **Camera Politica** describe the representational power of films in this way:

Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of the broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. That construction occurs in part through the internalization of representations. (Ryan & Kellner: 12-13)

Here Ryan and Kellner offer more support and rationale for bringing popular film texts into classroom practice. They argue that films "execute a transfer from one discursive field to another." It is this quality of popular film which led me to investigating the power popular film might have in certain university classroom situations. My specific interest was to see how popular film, as a body of generally accessible cultural representations, might be used as a bridge between student experience and the more generally inaccessible body of critical theory presented in a general survey level sociology of education course.

While being keenly aware of my desires to incorporate educational practices which are both accessible and challenging to the critical abilities of young education students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and also wanting to disrupt standard

paper-writing and assessment trends for these future teachers, I have tried to devise a number of alternative teaching strategies which incorporate and value student's own knowledge and experience from outside the classroom context.

Many of the students in the teacher education program are quite young and from unchallenging and very traditional educational backgrounds. The course the Institution of Education is required of all students who pass through the program and is perhaps the only course in which these students will be asked to address issues of social justice and inequality, the social construction of reality, the moral and political implications of schooling, consciousness and knowledge-- the list goes on. Many students in each class become overwhelmed and lose touch with their own voices in relation to these often overwhelming issues and challenges.

With regard to such "burnout," one of my primary goals for these students was to provide them with opportunities to get together and create some conversations of their own in relation to contemporary social issues and the ways that such social issues have been portrayed. It was also a primary goal of mine to use popular materials which they might "read" within the context of their new theoretical awarenesses and understandings. A further goal of mine was to reduce the kind of enforced alienation which occurs whenever students are sent out to create a paper on their own. Since many of the issues of the course deal with issues and problems of alienation and isolation in school and beyond, I sought a pedagogy of

relationship and communication between students concerning the reading of a text.

Popular films were a natural choice for me. I have always liked films and have often found myself in ongoing dialogues with myself and with others during and after viewing films. I have also been concerned that too little has been done with film, that as powerful and as penetrating as film is, little has been done to tap into this power and incorporate it into a reflective and reflexive public sphere. In general the public is made aware of certain films through advertisements and trailers, whose goal is to create sufficient desire in public segments to have people pay to see these films. Not a few films are surrounded by enough publicity so that a majority of the community is to some extent aware of the controversy. Most importantly for these classes, popular films are in the realm of all class members. Even if students have not seen a major release motion picture, such offering have been available for their potential viewing. Furthermore popular films are not in the specific domain of "academic" material and knowledge: high school and college students are the largest consumers of popular film. Because of this popular film should be understood as crossing the domain between student and "popular" knowledge and academic or "high" knowledge.

The following are instructions for an assignment in popular film that I have offered my Institution of Education classes for the past several years. The assignment is as much about collaborative thinking and writing as it is about probing specific critical issues in

education. Students are asked to state their first, second, and third choices of films they would like to watch and write about. Also, I encourage students to specify the films that they did not want to watch and assure them that I will respect their wishes. From these lists of film choices I match as many first choices as I am able, putting people into writing pairs. Then first choices with second choices, and then second choices with second choices until each member of the class has a film viewing and writing partner. In some classes a single group consists of three students. So far, I have never had to give any student their third choice of film; this has been luck and I suspect that time will change this.

I have been fortunate in obtaining popular video films without too great a personal expense. A local video shop had gone out of business and sold its stock at very low prices. I selected a number of films which have, as they seem to me, a particularly powerful critical and educational text or subtext. These are subjective choices and I believe that any popular film has critical significance and can be read in relation to critical practice in education, although some are of more immediate usefulness and pertinence than others. These are the core of films I have offered for students in these class situations: **Rumble Fish, The Year My Voice Broke, Roger & Me, Dead Poet's Society, Cool Hand Luke, Shirley Valentine, Matewan, Miss Jane Pittman, Ironweed, Tommy, and Sex, Lies & Videotape.** Since these students view the films on their own personal time, on their personal video equipment, and in their private homes I have not had to deal with copyright infringement issues.

What follows is the assignment guidelines I offer to the students as I hand them their films and let them know of their partners. It is up to them to set the times and venues for viewing the film and I encourage them to view the film together if at all possible.

These films have been selected so that you might become involved in the experience and understanding of the major characters who are suffering within and struggling against a world that is not of their own making. Nevertheless, they are members of their culture and are presented with challenges of physical and psychic survival. They are also involved in activities toward greater meaning and contribute to wide public awareness of a film's content, construction or major issues.

I hope you will situate yourself in the experience and struggle of the main characters. I suspect that the more you are able to place yourself in the positions and challenges and oppression facing these characters, the more you will be able to address their struggles in response to our dominant cultural methods of justifying and rationalizing unnecessary human suffering in our world.

**PART 1:** In the first two pages lay out the issues you will address. Who is the main character(s) and what is the nature of the challenges that person(s) faces? What are the cultural conditions of that character(s)? It is very important that in one to two paragraphs you let the reader know the story. What is the story that is told, from beginning to end? What transformations occur, or might have occurred but never finally do?

**PART 2:** What are the cultural situation and setting which surround the major characters? What separates and divides people in the film and how are people suffering because of these divisions? Who is it that benefits from these divisions?

How is the oppression represented in the film connected to the values and beliefs of the dominant ideology? How has the oppression been socially constructed? What choices of our culture help to maintain this oppression?

What are the values and beliefs of the main characters which are at odds with or opposed to the dominant stance? In other words, what are the goals and visions and activities of the main characters towards a more just and meaningful world?

PART 3: How do issues of this film relate to problems and issues within our contemporary institution of education? Relate issues of this film to problems that currently confront the field of education.

What moral commitments or vision are presented in this film that would enrich the lives of students today?

How does this film lead you to notions of activities that might change and transform our schools toward greater compassion and justice?

How has this film challenged you in your work and thinking in education? With what questions has this work left you?

#### SUGGESTIONS:

This is a collaborative effort and I suspect that few of you are accustomed to such writing activity. Your partner can be a great source of strength and clarification. I believe that the work of two people working together can be much greater than the sum of those people's separate work. Trust this possibility. Help each other, challenge each other. Each of you has different strengths and ways of understanding and making sense of things. It is fine to let me hear parts of your conversation with each other. I encourage you, however, not to divide the questions and string them together as a paper. This ruins a collaborative paper, I believe, more than anything else.

I encourage you to address at least two sources from our book of readings to inform and enrich your discussion, especially in

the third part of your paper. I believe that readings from the beginning of our class through the middle of the term bear on some, if not all, of the issues of the films. These readings generally support ways of understanding how our world and culture arise out of processes of social construction.

There is a lot of material in your films and I do not expect you to address all of it. Look for the scenes and lines which back up the points you make. Use the central and pivotal parts of the film. If your film is historically set or from another culture, think on how that film bears on issues which challenge schools today.

If you need my assistance, do not hesitate to ask. The sooner, the better. I hope you enjoy yourselves!

After I mark and respond to these papers I add another complexity to the group and partner process by creating groups of four students. The goal of this work is to encourage the students to think and write critically about each other's work. In the above assignment students are already being set off balance by being asked to write a cooperative paper and then being assessed for a single grade shared by both partners. I let them know that this is a difficult and unfamiliar space to be in and I encourage them to negotiate and cooperate as well as they can manage. At this second part of the assignment some students are in a real panic, they are raising issues of justice and equality on very personal grounds. I listen to their concerns and we spend time class negotiating some of the particular issues which are raised. Here is the second assignment.

What to do?

In 3-4 tight and well written pages respond to each other's papers. How is your work in education enriched by this paper? I realize that you will not necessarily have seen the film about which you are reading.

Take the issues you raise in your own paper and those raised in the other group's paper and, after first laying out the most compelling issues, say what the two papers have to tell us about problems faced by both our institution of education and our larger culture. How do the papers give us a richer perspective on these issues? Finally, what suggestions do you have for their paper so that it might gain in strength?

As I hope is clear, this classroom work is fairly "high risk."

Students become impassioned, some rebel and want to do their work entirely on their own. Depending on the circumstances and the cases they raise, sometimes I submit to this. I encourage them to trust in the process and I encourage them to not fear the grading process. I try to assure them that by the nature of the assignment I myself must find and struggle with a more just means of assessment. Generally this means that assessment marks are significantly inflated. This does not bother me since I am wishing to encourage the process as much or more than their written products. Also, I use this as a way of underscoring how subjective grades are. I let them know, as much as I sense is helpful and encouraging to them, of my own agenda and attitudes about this work. Of course this trusting in the process and not the graded product is a very difficult thing for them to do after twelve or more years of grade-aware conditioning.

I have been very pleased with how students move and work with these assignments. Students generally respond very favorably at the end of this work and are able to talk about the ways these collaborative writing processes have influenced their educational thinking in critical ways. I am more and more aware, however, that the issues in the films, and their bridging power in relation to specific critical issues, have a very low profile in relation to the process challenges of these assignments. In other words, the assignments are more about collaboration, pedagogical negotiation, and practical critical discussion than about probing the critical potential of the film texts themselves in relation to making critical issues more accessible. It is from this recognition that I have more specifically set out to probe the critical potential of a popular film text, read it critically, and then offer it for view to a number of student educators.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CRITICAL READINGS OF PUMP UP THE VOLUME IN SEARCH OF A MORE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Before going further it is important that we take a look at some of the ideas and issues we have addressed in the previous four chapters. This chapter marks a change in style and presentation from the first four chapters but is nonetheless dependent on the previous chapters in spirit and conception.

In Chapter One I present a brief overview of contemporary critical theory. I introduce the ideas of several critical and conflict theorists. Furthermore, I affirm the philosophical and moral foundation that reality, and especially social reality, has been socially constructed and, as such, presents us with the challenge which comes with understanding that any form or expression of justice or injustice has been socially constructed. From this position a form of radical hope might emerge in which through democratic activities and our own personal struggling with conscience and consciousness we can begin to construct a more just and decent world. Further, I link critical theory and educational practice in the goal and hope of creating a transformed world through educational work. In this chapter, however, I charge that much of critical theory remains inaccessible to teacher educators in their classroom practices and

raise the question of how a greater accessibility might be achieved through the use of texts of popular culture.

In Chapter Two I present some of the work of three critics of late twentieth century advanced capitalist American culture. Specifically I address their particular notions and constructions of how alienation and a collapsed democratic sphere are concurrent phenomena which are institutionalized into the fabric of our everyday lives. The work of Eric Fromm and his conception of the alienated marketing character is explored. For Fromm this alienated marketing character is endemic to our times and can be characterized by patterns of living and working which have to do less with values, beliefs and processes of becoming and much more with patterns of ownership and control. From there the work of Christopher Lasch is presented, in particular his notion of the survival mentality. For Lasch this survival mentality is characterized in our culture by patterns of social behavior which are siege-like and paranoid. Lasch argues that late twentieth century Americans are increasingly living beleaguered lives of hopelessness and despair seeking only to survive. Finally, the work of Robert Bellah and his team in **Habits of the Heart** is presented, illustrating the ways in which contemporary Americans increasingly are retreating into a "little circle of family and friends" as we seek the "good life" instead of joining together in any larger social solidarity or activity. Throughout this chapter I have attempted to illustrate a number of metaphors and examples for understanding some of the cultural dynamics at play in current expressions and experiences of

alienation and social and political voicelessness. What emerges from each of the three perspectives I explore is a contemporary American who is an isolated individual, rich with consumer and aesthetic freedoms and choices, but with an ever shrinking sphere in which to meet with other citizens in democratically transformative or challenging ways.

In Chapter Three I explore the work of three prominent workers in critical theory and education. Concepts from Paulo Freire's seminal masterpiece in critical pedagogy, **The Pedagogy of the Oppressed**, are presented with special emphasis on Freire's notion of the banking concept of education and how this constellation of pedagogical practices silences and alienates students and teachers alike. From there I explore the pedagogical thinking of Ira Shor in his work **Critical Thinking and Everyday Life**. This work is aimed specifically at uncovering how alienation and a corresponding collapsed democratic and public sphere have been institutionalized in patterns of everyday school life. Then I present some of the work of Michael Apple in **Education and Power** as it relates to understanding how alienation and a dearth of democratic voice and practice have been constructed in school culture. From the works of each of these critical educators I draw passages from their work which point to a potential liberating and critical power through addressing texts of popular culture in critical ways. By the end of this chapter it should be clear not only that alienation and a collapsed democratic sphere are institutionalized elements of everyday classroom experience, but also that texts of popular culture

might have a special place in the struggle to dislodge some of this alienation and voicelessness by giving educational communities untapped opportunities for open discussion of critical and potentially transformative issues within the general classroom.

In Chapter Four I explore some of the qualities of popular texts as they might be related to greater critical literacy and further pedagogical activity. I specifically indicate ways in which popular film texts might be used in critical contexts and promote opening democratic and critical spaces within classroom practice. Within this chapter the work of Antonio Gramsci, Henry Giroux, Roger Simon, Paul Smith, and Stanley Aronowitz, among others, is presented as it relates to ways in which texts of popular culture pose particular challenges and possibilities to the critical work of educators toward an emancipatory educational practice. By the end of this chapter texts of popular culture should be understood as particularly potent tools in a critical and liberatory classroom. Furthermore, many of the contradictions and difficulties involved in classroom use of texts of popular culture, and specifically film texts, should be apparent.

It is at this point in this paper that I make a major shift in the form and content of research and expression relating to how institutionalized alienation keeps us from our more critical and emancipatory voices and practices in schools and in our larger culture. Even though the previous four chapters have been about the cultural mechanisms which help keep people lodged in alienating and alienated voicelessness in their world, and even though these chapters have been informed and supported by people whom I

consider to be the among the best critical writers and thinkers working toward liberational and emancipatory educational and social transformation, on their own these chapters fail to offer the kinds of personal voice and reflection necessary to begin making the strong critical theory presented in them more accessible and alive in everyday educational practice. The best of their work, in fact, supports the personal challenge that we come to our own understandings and voice of the critical challenges and dilemmas which only we are capable of articulating and addressing.

I believe that we will not find or create a transformed and just world until we become actively involved in bringing our own lives, actions, and voices into such critical processes. As I have stated before, sound critical theory is an essential component of revolutionary and emancipatory change; but it is finally insufficient in itself to bring about such change. It is only through taking these theories and ideas into our own conversations and practices as teachers and educators, both among ourselves and in our classrooms, that we will begin to live and struggle toward a more humane critical pedagogy.

Thus far this paper has been about presenting the foundational groundwork for why and how we might begin appropriating texts of popular culture, specifically film texts, toward a greater critical literacy and practice in our classrooms. Furthermore, a major theme and challenge of this paper has been to explore ways of making critical theory, which is often presented in a higher level academic

voice and format, more accessible to school teachers and their students at the general classroom level.

As much as the first four chapters have been essential in setting an increasingly more focused and clear stage for such pedagogical activity and work, it is my intention that this chapter serve as the pivot-point toward transforming sound critical theory into critical practice. Furthermore, this chapter is the stage for my own hermeneutical struggle with a popular film as a critical text and then my struggle with this text in a conversation with a group of four young student educators as we discussed the critical possibilities of this particular text.

What I hope the reader will begin to understand, if such an understanding is not already developing, is that it is through appropriating ideas and conversations and expressions from our world that we may begin to live more critically and closer to hope, playing more active roles toward a more just and decent world. By "appropriation" I am referring to deliberately taking as our own ideas and expressions which exist most often unchallenged and unquestioned and which we have learned to receive passively as truth. With such appropriations we might begin to challenge these ideas and notions, by engaging with others in conversations that address the moral and political implications of these ideas and expressions. We might then begin to move closer to our vision of a more just and meaningful world.

For me it is only through the act of appropriating the conversations and texts of our world that we can possibly begin to

live in more emancipatory ways. Such appropriations--taking as our own the ideas, constructions, and conversations which often seem larger than life and beyond our reach--are not part of our everyday cultural or personal activity. Indeed, I have intended in the first four chapters , and most specifically in chapters two and three, to illustrate the ways our critical abilities have been deadened and drummed out of us as we have been pushed more and more into the silent corners of private individualism. This is an individualism which leaves us under siege and out of breath struggling mostly to survive and then only to procure for ourselves just enough pleasure, escape , or success which grants us just enough personal power and strength to not completely despair and which keeps us functioning, however disfunctionally, in our contemporary economic, social, and political webs of activity.

The work of appropriating these cultural conversations, or texts as it is useful to call them, requires that we begin to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. It is precisely by making such strange critical activities familiar to us, by appropriating cultural texts, that we can begin to think and act in more critical ways. And it is only by making such familiar cultural expressions strange and problematical that we may begin to access the world of our own cultural inscription and subjectivity. It is precisely by finding our own voices in conversations with ourselves and with others about these taken for granted cultural texts, presentations, and embedded assumptions that their naturalness, and then the naturalness of much of the built-in injustice, despair, and alienation,

might be explored and then, perhaps challenged and rewritten. And after we have explored and challenged such constructions through the voices we raise with ourselves and with others, transformations of these constructed realities, I believe, will follow.

Such processes of appropriating cultural texts in critical ways and then engaging in critically challenging conversations with them and each other will certainly be difficult. Proscriptive manuals and clearly ordered "how to" books, I suspect, will do more to get in the way of such difficult pedagogical work than to encourage it. For far too long we have been told how to read, how to think, how to speak for such guidelines to be of any critical power. Much of this legacy has done piteously little in the name of emancipation and social justice and has done even less toward such reformative pedagogical practice.

The appropriation I am talking about is something quite different. It requires the kind of safe space which allows us to begin reconnecting with the position and construction of our own subjectivities and personal experience. Such an unfamiliar finding of our own voice and our own way can not focus on the kinds of "rightness" or "wrongness," about the kinds of "correctness" and "incorrectness" which characterize how we generally understand and evaluate our educational expression and learning today. Instead, we must begin to be prepared and even eager to listen to things in our voices to which we have not been attending. We must begin to listen to others much less in terms of correctness and rightness and much more for the unique reality and experience that their voices bring to

our own conversations and understandings of the world. Such work requires-in addition to a number of supporting qualities not the least of which is time-an open-handed generosity with ourselves and with each other. A generosity which is at the same time critical and demanding and also slow to judge and reluctant to condemn.

This work is inherently personal and aesthetic. It is work in which we begin to let go of some of the constraints of our consciousness as we are guided by our developing conscience, as we begin to make space for the wanderings and experience of, for lack of a better word, our soul. It is to such appropriations and conversations that this dissertation now turns. The work is personal, both with myself and with the student educators who converse with the popular film text **Pump Up The Volume**.

As I previously have related, I have been drawn to the power of films as critical texts for a number of years. Within each film an entire moral universe is presented and then closed by the film's end. Further, films are created to provide specific kinds of pleasurable experiences for their audiences and are popularly successful to the extent that their pleasures generalize across populations. As cultural artifacts which are created for, and at some level elicit, pleasure, films are more about making a space for us to experience our bodies than they are about denying body experience. In this ways films have the power of reintroducing our bodies into general classroom experience. In films we laugh, we cry, we sweat, we squirm, we close our eyes, our hearts race, our palms grow clammy, we stomp our feet. In experiencing films we do all these things with our bodies

with little feeling of inappropriateness, or guilt, or self-condemnation.

For me the most pleasurable films are those which move me and challenge me personally, socially, or politically. Being moved or challenged in such ways helps me to feel more alive. In such films I sometimes find greater connection to myself and to others. Sometimes popular films lead me to a new kind of hopefulness--and hope, however fleeting or imaginary, is an experience which brings me pleasure. And so it is these kinds of films, the kinds which resonate with my own personal, social, and political struggles and the kinds which move me and bring me into new relations of hope and challenge, which I choose to bring to the classroom.

When I first saw **Pump Up The Volume** a number of years ago it immediately struck me as a potentially powerful film for use in a number of critical classroom contexts. The film is at once exciting and brash and deeply moving, personal, and intimate. It is complex and sophisticated in its social and political analysis and accessible and within reach of a broad range of audiences. The film is full of familiar characters and draws these characters clearly enough for audience members to identify and converse with these characters. I personally identified with many of the characters represented, especially as I looked back on my own experiences in the public schools. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, this film is filled with a variety of contradictory spaces which are challenging and unresolved. It is these contradictions, and the

conversations viewers might have in relation to these contradictions, that add to the critical potential of this particular film.

What follows is essentially two parts of a conversation with this film text. In Part One I review and discuss the events of the film as they relate to me in my role as a critical educator. In this section I name and briefly explore a number of the critical themes and representations of the film. I position myself as an interested audience subject as I respond to moments and interchanges in the film which resonate with my own potentially critical concerns. In the last part of this section I introduce and discuss a number of the more compelling contradictory themes which emerge in this film. It is within contradictions such as these, I argue, that texts of popular culture present their greatest difficulties for their audiences and it is also within such contradictory spaces that the potential critical openings within such texts are found. The four contradictory themes I raise in relation to this film can be simplified as followed: cynicism and despair versus hope and possibility; traditional role models versus radical role models toward a more decent world; alienation and the culture of individualism versus interpersonal communion, solidarity, and responsibility as ideal and possible subject positions; and the case for liberal conservative reform versus radical and revolutionary change and social transformation as the film's most significant ethos.

In Part Two of this chapter I presents elements of a conversation between myself and a group of four student educators after an informal viewing of this film. In this chapter I probe the

kinds of critical issues and thinking which emerge in this conversation, the challenges that these students raise, the excitement they experience after viewing the film, and the possibilities they desire for some more just educational practice. Also I explore some of the dynamics of powerlessness and despair these students experience in relation to **Pump Up The Volume**. Throughout this section I address the ways in which these students' conversation is marked by and suspended within the tensions of contradictory impulses and desires, specifically those raised in the first part of this chapter.

## **PART ONE: Pump Up The Volume--A Critical Reading Of The Film Text**

### EVERYBODY KNOWS

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded  
 Everybody knows with their fingers crossed  
 Everybody knows that the war is over  
 Everybody knows that the good guys lost  
 Everybody knows the fight is fixed  
 The poor stay poor, and the rich get rich  
 That's how it goes, everybody knows.

Everybody knows that the boat is sinking  
 Everybody knows that the captain lied  
 Everybody's got this broken feeling  
 Like their momma or their dog just died  
 Everybody's hands are in their pockets  
 Everybody wants a box of chocolates  
 And a long-stemmed rose,  
 Everybody knows.

Everybody knows that it's now or never  
Everybody knows that it's me or you  
Everybody knows that to live forever  
Then you hide a line or two  
Everybody knows the deal is rotten  
Old Black Joe's still picking cotton  
For your ribbons and bows  
Yes, everybody knows, everybody knows.  
That's how it goes.

With the above words by Leonard Cohen and Sharon Robinson and sung by Concrete Blonde we are brought into the world of **Pump Up The Volume**. **Pump Up The Volume**, written and directed by Allen Moyle, is a film about alienation, powerlessness and despair as it occurs in the lives of a number of fictitious characters who live in the mythical town of "Paradise Hills," Arizona. It is also about these characters finding space and opportunity to express their own voices, voices that have otherwise been silenced in their school and home lives. It can justifiably be said that this film is another teenage angst movie created as upper B-grade cinema fodder for a carefully researched and marketed target audience. Indeed, it is hard to find any film created for general release which is not specifically created for some carefully researched and marketed target audience. In some ways there could not be a more perfect film for investigating the possibilities and limitations of using popular film texts for making issues of alienation and a collapsed democratic sphere more accessible to viewing audiences. The film is centered around the issue of public voices and public communication in the face of and in response to experiences of institutionalized alienation. Furthermore,

the presentation of these themes is far from being unproblematic. The moral representations in this film are often at odds and the film is marked more by the power and quality of the contradictions which emerge than for the ease and resolutions which are provided at the end of the film.

Paradise Hills is a suburban place situated in the sun-belt of the US Southwest, recently constructed from the kind of middle-class affluence which has spawned a number of similar towns throughout the nation. This town is "nice" in many senses. Poverty is completely invisible in the town. Cars and houses are new. Almost all the people in the community are white. In fact, we only hear one black person speak in the film, the father of a student, and his voice is decidedly well-educated and with no trace of non-standard English. We see students with fast cars, home computers, extensive sound and video equipment. Life in Paradise Hills is decidedly "good," life is soft and privilege abounds. This is a film about teenage angst in upper middle class white America.

The soft life portrayed in Paradise Hills sets a strong contrast to the lived experiences of the students of Hubert Humphrey High. HHH is the school which boasts the highest SAT scores in the state. Ms. Loretta Kresswood, the school principal, states early in the piece that the only thing that matters in education today is test scores. She states:

*School is judged on one category only--academic scores. The lesson of modern education is 'Nothing comes easy, no pain, no gain.'*

There should be nothing unfamiliar to our audience's ears from this decidedly middle of the road proclamation. The peculiar thing about this high school, however, is the growing representations of despair in its student body. As the story unfolds we begin to understand that all is not well in "Paradise" as we learn that the school also has one of the highest drop-out rates in the region.

Kresswood's astute understanding that academic scores are the single and almost exclusive criteria for judging educational excellence sets the framework for much of the plot of **Pump Up The Volume**. As the story progresses we learn that for Kresswood "No pain, no gain" means expelling or strong-arming low academic achievers, "undesirables," out of the school while still receiving public financial support for these students by maintaining their names on the roles. Some real life educational reductionists might even support Kresswood's tactics by backing up her assumption that certain categories of student will always be losers, that statistics can demonstrate that "low achievers" in school will have very similar life outcomes whether they finish high school or not. From such a position it might even seem justifiable, as it was for our fictitious principal, to concentrate funds on students from the upper end of the academic scores scale.

Most of our story is centered on the experiences and activities of Mark Hunter, alienated and silent student by day and radio pirate disc jockey "Hard Harry Hard-on" by night. Mark has been uprooted

from his home and friendship group in New York. His father moved the family to Arizona for a gentler and more prosperous life.

Mark's transformation into the hard talking Hard Harry came quite by accident. His parents purchased a short wave radio set for Mark so that he could contact his old friends in New York. Mark never mastered the equipment and, instead, started broadcasting popular music and his own brand of sarcastic and startlingly penetrating social commentary. At first Mark had no idea that anyone would listen to his broadcasts. His radio show was his way of breaking his own silence, regardless of audience. In any event, he opened a post office box so that people might write him with commentary or queries with this challenge to his listeners: *"I want to hear the size, shape and feel of it. Give me your blood, sweat and tears, your ectoplasm and cum."*

This is a film about voice and we first encounter Mark's voice at the opening of the film and before the opening credits. We hear sound equipment switch on as we look over a middle class neighborhood in anywhere America. The youthful male voice-over asks: *"You ever get the feeling that everything in America is completely fucked up?"* As the voice continues the audience is challenged about the structure and foundation of their American way of life and is let know that everything is not all right.

*You know what I feel like? The whole country is one inch from saying: That's it. Forget it.' Think about it. Everything's polluted: the environment, the government, the schools, you name it . . . . Speaking of schools, I was walking down the hallowed halls the other day and I asked myself, 'Is there life*

*after high school?' 'Cause I can't face tomorrow, let alone a whole year of this shit. Yeah, you got it folks, it's me again with a little attitude for all of you out in white bread land, all of you nice people living in the middle of America the Beautiful. And you folks guessed it. Tonight I'm as horny as a ten peckered owl, so stay tuned because this is Hard Harry reminding you to eat your cereal with a fork and do your homework in the dark.*

Mark's view of the world is critical and demanding. His pain and suffering are obvious and he has moved from a position of silence to one of speaking his mind, albeit with considerable sarcasm and irreverence.

With this introduction we are let know that the following presentation is at least going to attempt to address Maxine Greene's challenge to "Make the strange familiar and the familiar strange." In a few short moments we are introduced to the alienation of school life, and the difficulties of growing up in a world of increased meaninglessness as environmental and social disasters benumb our minds. But the tone here is not numb. We are listening to someone who, although sarcastic and cynical, is still alive enough to be angry and express that anger in some fairly clear-sighted ways. Also we are made aware that our DJ is alive in his body, his understanding of the world is not entirely relegated to intellectualizations and abstractions and he speaks as much a discourse of the body and of pleasure as he does of social critique and outcry. Even though his presentation is crude, to the extent that we are still alive in our bodies, we recognize Mark as a living breathing human with desires

and feelings like our own. What makes Mark so different from us, the audience of the film, is not the originality of his insight but that he is expressing these opinions, desires and understandings in a vigorously public forum.

Mark is a master of one-liners and his brand of psycho-critique fills the film with interest and pleasure. While responding to a caller who might be being sexually abused by her brother he offers a thought which is characteristic of the film: *Feeling screwed up in a screwed up place and a screwed up time does not mean you're screwed up.*"

This film is filled with physical and sexual innuendo and expression. The audience is presented with a view of student life in which body language, crude jokes and sexual tension are pervasive. This fits with the growing awareness of educational writers that school life involves competing discourses: the official discourse of the school, in which formal curriculum and administrative communication occurs between teachers and students, and the discourse of students and their everyday reality, in which a much more personally meaningful communication occurs between students themselves.

Most of the film's most powerful moments are the scenes in which Mark converses with different students and the particular kinds of despair, isolation, and hopelessness they are experiencing. The most powerful, perhaps, is the conversation that Mark has with a suicidal student and then Mark's on-the-air response after that

student kills himself. That particular interchange is investigated in a later section.

One of Mark's most appealing characteristics is his ability to identify and apparently understand other people's positions of pain and isolation. For example, one of the key interchanges between Mark and an audience member who has written him deals with the person's first homosexual encounter. I find it puzzling, however, that this is the only person with whom Mark has a significant conversation whose name remains anonymous to both Mark and the film audience. On the air this person recounts his experience and speaks his despair at his friend no longer talking with him or acknowledging him. After he tells his story Mark is asked: *"I guess you think I'm a faggot wimp, right?"* In a somewhat politically correct but still quite moving way, Mark refuses to acknowledge this person as the "other" and instead, identifies with him. *"I'm just thinking how strong people can be. and how everyone is alike in some way and how everyone needs the same things."*

Mark is clearly our story's hero. He is able to see clearly what for many of us is almost impossible to put into words. Furthermore, Mark acts the way many of us would like to. Although suffering under the burden of an oppressive school and society by day, by night he finds the power within himself to speak his truth and in doing so touches the lives of a lot of other people in meaningful ways.

Nora is another key character in this film. Mark receives letters from a woman he calls the "Eat Me, Beat Me Lady" who is as

wild and forthright in her letters as Mark is on his radio show. This correspondent resides in the same untouchable anonymity as Mark and never lets her phone number be known. Longing for more community with this person Mark conjectures:

*She's probably a lot like me, a legend in her own mind. But I bet in real life she is not that wild. I bet she's like a lot of us walking briskly in the halls, pretending to be distracted.*

What our main character is telling us, I believe, is that the barriers between our public and private selves are solid and well built and effectively keep our "free" selves from our selves which function in a social and public sphere.

We do meet this person, however, and Nora, a fellow student, becomes a pivotal force in the film. In many ways Nora is a radical, a free spirit, someone who, although clever and aware, cuts class at will and is vocally critical of the school and certain members of the faculty. Also she is bold enough to write passionate and wildly emotional letters to Hard Harry, and clever enough to track down and uncover Hard Harry as the mild and alienated Mark. Furthermore, in the film she serves as the voice who challenges Mark into recognizing that he is morally responsible for his actions as Hard Harry, that morally he cannot simply disappear from the airwaves because things are getting out of hand.

Although in some ways Nora is a radical character and role model, for the most part we must see her as a relatively conservative Hollywood character. In the end she is Mark's support and sidekick.

She is the one who supports the man, the hero, of the film. In the film she would be little more than interesting if it were not for her association with Mark and if she did not make his cause her cause. Her voice in the film is powerful, but only in primary relation to Mark's voice. And in the end, for assisting Mark with his final radio transmission, Nora is handcuffed and taken away just as Mark is. The significant difference, however, is that Nora's voice has remained a private voice: she never speaks on the air, she neither activates nor enjoys a public sphere in the way that Mark does.

Because of this we must see Nora as a relatively conservative character and film convention. Without her role in the film Mark would have stopped broadcasting much earlier. His cumulative voice and presentation would have been much less significant. Nora is important, even essential in the film, but her role is an adjunct one to the major male role, she exists and is important in the film to the extent that she "stands by her man." She is clever and challenging and makes the connection that Hard Harry and Mark are the same person. In the story, Nora serves to support and challenge Mark denying Mark an easy way out of the turmoil, questioning and confusion which have occurred primarily through Mark's radio actions. Even though he continues to live in anonymity as Hard Harry, Nora insists that Mark be responsible for the kinds of communication he has opened and encouraged.

This support is enough for Mark and that evening, as FCC vehicles fill the area to triangulate and locate Mark's broadcast position, he turns his mother's jeep into a mobile radio transmitter.

As evening falls students are rallying on the school playing field, teenage mayhem abounds, an effigy of Principal Kresswood is burned, more graffiti are in evidence. As Mark begins playing tunes and as Nora drives their Jeep, we learn of the corruption that Principal Kresswood engaged in to increase funding while assuring that students with the lowest SAT scores were either expelled or railroaded from the school. As Ms. Emerson, our model teacher, supplies the incriminating evidence, Mark's father, the school commissioner, suspends Kresswood from her duties.

In the last five minutes of the film the audience is aware that Mark and Nora will be caught by the authorities who have been tracking their radio broadcast from their Jeep. Mark's voice disguising harmonizer is not functioning and he decides to go on the air without it and in so doing must find his own voice, the voice which he decides can no longer remain anonymous. Mark continues to broadcast, entreating his audience to "hang in there."

When at this point a helicopter appears, Mark and Nora realize that they will soon be apprehended. Mark continues to broadcast as he entreats his audience, both within the film and the audience watching the film, to seize the air, to find our own voices and to come together in some new public space of communication and debate.

*Everyone, listen up. It's not over yet. It's just beginning, but it's up to you. I'm calling for every kid to seize the air, steal it, it belongs to you. Speak out! They can't stop you. Find your voice and use it. Keep this thing going. Pick a name, go on the air. It's your life, take charge of it. Do it! Try it! Try anything! Spill your guts out! Say 'Shit!' and 'Fuck!' a million times if you*

*want to, but you decide. Fill the Air! Steal it! Keep the air alive! TALK HARD!"*

At this point we are at the end of the film. Mark and Nora are handcuffed and are taken to the police van. As they are driven away we hear a number of young voices at the beginning of their own radio shows: *"This is the real radio show for people on the streets."*

Now we turn to three discussions of three contradictory tensions and dilemmas which are raised within this film. These discussions are both personal explorations of how these issues are raised and problematized for me in relation to this particular film text as well as conversations related to more specifically critical issues which are raised in the film.

### **On cynicism and despair versus hope and possibility**

**Pump Up The Volume** is a film which faces us squarely with the reality that we do, indeed, live in troubled times. The film goes beyond traditional academic presentations of our troubled times by presenting our present condition in a more viscerally poignant and powerful form. This is, I understand, partly how popular films make concepts and notions of our lives and greater social realities more accessible and engaging and for a broader audience than standard formal texts.

There can hardly be a more profound issue related to alienation, powerlessness and despair than suicide. Indeed, Camus

challenges us that the most important and difficult question we must ask ourselves is whether or not we will commit suicide. One of the most powerful interchanges of this film occurs between our DJ, Mark, and the pained and despairing student Malcolm Kaiser. On his radio show Mark opens a letter which he is not certain is genuine. The simple note reads: "*Hard Harry, do you believe that I should kill myself?*" It is signed and contains a contact phone number. Mark phones the number and is immediately connected to Malcolm. Malcolm is sitting at his desk in his dimly lit room. We see an image many parents would wish for their children. A student casually and neatly dressed attending to his work on his word processor. Indeed, this is an image many students are offered as the ideal which will lead to future success. As is clear from the conversation, however, the disparity between image and reality is great.

"*How are you going to it?*" asks Mark in a semi-mocking tone.

"*I'm going to blow my fucking head off,*" is Malcolm's undeniably serious response.

Mark asks why Malcolm will kill himself, trying to open him up a bit in semi-mocking style saying, "*You have a reason, don't you?*"

"*I'm all alone,*" is the simple response.

Mark responds in a markedly more empathetic and connected way,

*"Maybe it's OK to be alone sometime. Everybody's alone."*

*"You're not alone,"* counters Malcolm.

At this point Mark breaks from the rather arrogant distance he has maintained throughout his telecasts and tells us something about his daily school life and existence: *"I didn't talk to one person today--not counting teachers. I sit alone everyday in the stairway eating my lunch and reading a book."* The film audience is well aware of Mark's pained, withdrawn and isolated life at school and is seeing Mark reaching from his own weakness and vulnerability to Malcolm. The connection is not to be as Malcolm breaks the connection. Mark attempts to reconnect with Malcolm but the phone is engaged. The audience can see that the receiver is off the hook as Malcolm begins to load a handgun. Mark tells his audience, *"I hate this, I'd kill myself but I'm too tired to bother."*

The film audience learns the full outcome of Malcolm's despair in the next school day. The scene is in the teacher's lounge and the hard-nosed and prestige-driven principal, Loretta Kresswood, begins, *"I have an announcement to make . . . "* The camera breaks to our teacher-hero, Ms. Emerson, who addresses her English class, *"I have some very upsetting news . . . I know it hurts . . . It's painful to lose someone."* As an audience we are given the full name of Malcolm, Mark hears Malcolm's name for the first time and we know that Malcolm has killed himself.

The next night Mark is unsure as to what to do, whether to go on the air or not. He begins his radio show with a soulful song in memoriam, changes it to an angry rock song and then cuts in:

*I'm sorry Malcolm. I never said 'Don't do it.' You hear about some kid who did something stupid, something desperate. How could he do such a thing? It's really quite simple, actually. Consider the life of a teenager. You have parents and teachers telling you what to do. You have movies, magazines and TV telling you what to do. But you know what you've got to do. Your job, your purpose, is to get accepted, get a cute girlfriend and think up something great to do with the rest of your life. What if you're confused and can't imagine a career. What if you're funny looking and can't get a girlfriend. No one wants to hear it. But the terrible secret is that being young is sometimes less fun than being dead.*

*Suicide is wrong, but the interesting thing about it is how uncomplicated it seems. There you are. You have all these problems swarming around in your brain. But here is one simple, one incredibly simple, solution. I'm just surprised it doesn't happen every day around here.*

Mark continues and gives a number of reasons why not to commit suicide, then returns to his own self-reflection:

*I'm sick of being ashamed. I don't mind being dejected and rejected but I'm not going to be ashamed about it. At least pain is real . . . . The real me is just as worried as the rest of you. They say I'm disturbed. Of course I'm disturbed. And if not, then why not?*

*Doesn't this land of blindness and blandness make you want to do something crazy? Then why not do something crazy? It makes a whole lot more sense than blowing your fucking brains out. Go nuts! Go crazy! Get creative!*

For Mark, life is largely despairing and hopeless. He sees no significant purpose in the life he is made to undergo at school. He is broadly and generally clearsightedly despairing at the current world situation. But given this cynicism and despair Mark decides to at least speak out. He musters the energy in himself to express this despair and in doing so acts within a certain discourse of hope. It is clear from the above interchange with Malcolm and the aftermath of Malcolm's suicide that Mark has contemplated suicide himself. In recognizing the despair and isolation which is culturally endemic he offers his audience the salve that they are not alone in feeling this way. The hope is marginal but indisputably significant.

And so where does this leave us, the audience of the film? We have paid our money, we are sitting in a cinema, or are in our homes or schools watching this film and are invited to ask ourselves: "Should I kill myself?" If we have at all taken seriously the previous social and cultural critique of the film this question cannot be easily dismissed. In some very significant ways we all are in some agreement with the words of the Leonard Cohen song which starts the language text of this film. Everybody does know that the dice are loaded. We have a frighteningly real sense that the poor stay poor and the rich get rich and that we are all doing just about all we can do simply to hang in there each day, get out of bed and face all that must be done just to maintain some fragile status quo in our lives. We are also painfully aware that almost all of our efforts are not about remedying social and structural ills in our society: there are relatively few of us who still keep our sights on some vision of a

better or more just world, many fewer are actively involved in making such visions real.

And more and more our collective consciousnesses demonstrate that kind of gnawing broken feeling that despite our best efforts so far, despite our best intentions and desires, we have been let down by our world in ways we suspect will never be resolved--and even more disturbing, in ways which might be altogether unresolvable. The contradictions in our own tenuous connection to security and safety have certainly been underscored by this film's presentation of our world. We cannot ignore that "Old Black Joe" still is picking cotton for us in places all around the world and that the result of these systems of legalized slave labor is what provides us with so much of our current escape into luxury and excess. We cannot ignore that all of the great themes of our world have, indeed, been turned into theme parks in which we purchase time shares of illusory satisfaction, illusory power, creativity, and influence.

And, again, we must ask ourselves, "Should I kill myself?" Malcolm does kill himself in the film and Harry does the "right thing" by apologizing to Malcolm and assuring us, his audience, that we must say "No." to suicide. It is not, perhaps, a very emphatic "No," but Mark tells us that suicide is not enough of a response to our current personal and cultural predicaments. Mark has told us that if he had the energy he would kill himself. He reminds us of the pain of being a teenager in that the paths that are to be followed have very little to do with addressing the very real tensions and conflicts of contemporary life. His description of the "job" of a teenager is

remarkably on target, if sexualized for a male audience: "*Your job, your purpose, is to get accepted, get a cute girlfriend and think up something great to do with the rest of your life.*"

I am amazed at how many primary school children are already remarkably involved in at least mentally fulfilling these obligations. I am amazed at the anxiety of very young children in "getting on" with the seriousness of their lives. They are aware that opportunities are scarce, that life is tough, that if they do not at least pretend to know what they are doing with the rest of their lives they may very well miss that last boat. Again and again the film shows us people who are desperately trying to get on board, who are trying to attain some reasonable degree of success, and for whom success is a contradictory and unresolved notion and possibility. Part of the real problem is that there are images all around us of people who do miss the boat, of people who have lost course and these pictures are bleak indeed. School children know, to varying degrees, what the lives of homeless people look like. Children understand that if they are not able to compete *and win*, in some very substantial ways in their school world and beyond, the only claim they will have in life is to the leftovers and--as the reality of a more socially responsive nation becomes increasingly elusive, these leftovers are minimal and mean at their very best.

But Mark does urge us to hang on and he is hanging on himself. What is his relationship to hope? As he responds to his audience in the aftermath of Malcolm's death, Mark lets us know that he finds a certain kind of power in refusing shame. The shame he is refusing is

central, I believe, to the kind of hope he is able to live as a character in this film. He states:

*I'm sick of being ashamed. I don't mind being dejected and rejected but I'm not going to be ashamed about it. At least pain is real . . . . The real me is just as worried as the rest of you. They say I'm disturbed. Of course I'm disturbed. And if not, then why not?*

So, for Mark, it is accepting his current positions of isolation and alienation, it is understanding that he is caught within certain existential and structural contradictions, it is accepting that he is both in pain and disturbed, and all of this without shame, that allow him to hang on.

I believe that Mark's final response to Malcolm, and to the notion of answering despair with suicide, represents a significant kind of hopefulness, and especially for those of us who are involved in education. First, it demands that we take a good hard look at the world around us. Mark is in our face, as he is in the faces of his radio audience members, letting us know the kinds of despair, pain and uncertainty which mark late twentieth-century capitalist America. Mark's version of hope insists that we look and see, no matter how bad the picture, no matter how insufficient we are, or believe ourselves to be, toward addressing the challenges presented within such awarenesses.

Second, Mark does not suggest for a moment that there is something inherently wrong with not knowing or understanding how everything should be or what all the answers are. He tells his

audience that being disturbed and confused in the face of our social and cultural situation is maybe the only place we realistically can be. Mark offers us, as teachers, a significant challenge. If we are not disturbed, if we are not involved in the tensions and challenges and physical and emotional pain of a great number of very important moral and ethical and political contradictions, then *why not?* If we are not, then Mark's response, I suspect, would be that we are in denial, that we are living under the shade of such well-constructed blinders that we can only be compounding other people's pain, as are Kresswood and the guidance counselor among others in the film. So for Mark, the great sin is acting as if everything is all right, or only marginally wrong. The only position he offers us is that we accept the difficult and uncertain situations that we are in.

The third measure and quality of hope offered by Mark is that we find a way to relinquish shame. For Mark, shame is the stuff which keeps us away from clearing, if not regrinding, our perceptual lenses--the lenses which allow us to see ourselves and the world around us in a more significantly critical way. He affirms his realization that shame often stands as a powerful mechanism within our culture which obscures a more clear view of the world and, if we listen closely, we can hear an implicit self-forgiveness which occurs as we relinquish the shame of our own inadequacy, of our own humanness. By releasing this shame we put ourselves in a significantly new position. At the same time we can see the incredibly difficult and despairing position that we are in--from personal to global spheres--and we can forgive ourselves for not

having all of the answers and for not having the power to markedly transform these realities, except within a very limited sphere.

Finally, however, the hope Mark offers to us is highly individualistic. Mark does not throw us together as people who must be seen and see ourselves as mutually responsible for and responsive to the personal and cultural challenges and dilemmas of our day. Instead, he throws us back onto ourselves. "*Go nuts! Go crazy! Get Creative!*" is his final solution to the dilemma of suicide. We must figure it out on our own and, finally, alone. The scenes following this charge underscore the form of this imperative. People are not coming together in socially meaningful and empowering ways. Instead, they are vandalizing the school, they are painting tokenistic slogans across school walls, they are burning effigies. While I wish to appreciate the cathartic powers of such "Go crazy!" expressions, I am distressed at the limitations of this view.

And the question, I hope, still haunts us, both as teachers and as citizens. If hope, then what kind of hope might we have? And if hope means doing things differently, then what forms of rebellion are appropriate and acceptable? It is a bit much to saddle the kids in this film with transforming their world in the same ways that we are aware that we, as teachers and administrators, are the ones who hold the significant balances of power in our professional school settings. And so in addressing the dilemma of what kind of responsible action we might take--given the power and strength of the kind of radical hope which really is being proffered by Mark--I

turn to an investigation of three kinds of teaching professionals in the film and their particular professional choices.

**On role models and social vision: conservative, liberal, and radical presentations**

There is a marked tension in **Pump Up The Volume** in a number of the role models presented, as well as the kinds of social vision which correspond with each. Certain of these models appear quite radical, while other models must be seen as being remarkably conservative. It is important to look at these role models largely for the reason that they present characters with whom audience members identify and become subjectively connected. And from a marketing perspective, it is largely the particular construction of characters within films with whom large numbers of audience members can identify that marks the degree of success of popular films. For this discussion, it is important to understand that for any particular characterization and role within a film there is a corresponding and conveniently simplified vision of how the world should be or could be. So as this discussion presents certain characters of the film, certain world views are being presented as well. Of particular interest in this film are characters who can more or less be situated in the camps of conservative consciousness, liberal consciousness, and perhaps even a marginally radical or critical consciousness.

Before addressing any specific characters of this film it is important to understand that characters in a film of popular culture

do a number of contradictory things for audiences. Any character of a film is and must be rather finitely and simplistically drawn. This is a boon to audiences in that we can get to know all there is to know about a character in a very short amount of time. A character can be rather simplisitcally drawn as hero or villain, a character can be drawn so that we are invited to desire or deplore identification with that character, and often we experience a combination of these contradictory desires. These characters are hardly ever drawn in a value-neutral way, they are drawn so that we will approve of some and deplore others. It is easiest for audiences to simply undergo and accept the particular moral positions as presented in the films and more difficult to look at these positions from outside their particular presentation.

Another difficulty related to investigating characters within popular films has to do with the ways in which these particular characters stand for and represent expressions of a particular world view, ideology, or philosophy within a film. As audience members we are led into the trap of making judgments not so much about the social and broader implications of such positions and ideologies but rather about the particular characters we see represented in the film. When important critical issues are embodied in individuals and roles, problems are individualized and particularized in such a way that we tend to avoid a structural critique of the issues. This should not be surprising to us, since so much of our cultural training is and has been about looking at the morality or behavior of particular individuals instead of investigating or addressing the ideologies and

attitudes represented by larger cultural institutions, dynamics, and constructions. This stands as yet another challenge which faces us as we address popular films in a critical manner.

Perhaps the easiest character to deal with in this film is Loretta Kresswood, the principal of Hubert Humphrey High. For the audience, Kresswood represents the ambitious conservative education worker who is corrupted and corrupting due to the zeal with which she exercises her considerable power. Kresswood has an undeniably clear sense of what education is about in our contemporary culture: "*School is judged on one category only-- academic scores.*" Her failure to be an effective conservative principal is not that she has inherently misunderstood what excellence means, but that she breaks the rules set up by the system in pursuing this excellence. We may hate Kresswood for the ways she mishandles students and abuses her powers, but we understand that modern education is intensely competitive, that the relaxed and at ease will be left behind. So, as audience members, we are more or less bound to admire Kresswood's zeal and energy, we accept her maxim that the lesson of "*modern education is 'No pain, no gain.'*" And we can only desire in ourselves her ability to single-mindedly pursue the formidable, and not altogether dismissable, professional goals she has set for herself and her school.

Kresswood's vision for school and society is a conservative one. Good education is about high academic scores and standing. From Kresswood's position we understand that there is nothing inherently wrong with the educational system as it stands and what is needed

in education are stalwart and energetic workers who will push on ahead. It does not matter that a significant number of students will fall by the way. That is an acceptable part of the academic equation. It is even an acceptable part of the larger social and cultural equation: the poor and wretched of the earth will always be with us. The challenge we have is figuring out ways, which do not so drastically break the rules that we are removed from our educational positions, to keep the poor and the wretched out of the way of those who do have a chance to compete effectively and prosper in the current educational system and beyond.

Such a hard-handed and conservative ethos should come as little surprise to any of us. Superior and gifted programs, special education programs, tracking programs are just a very few of the ways we accept and collude in our educational practices with so hard-fisted a vision of how education ought to be "delivered" to all members of our society. This film, however, certainly leaves us wanting something more than such a conservative educational program. Kresswood is drawn in such a way that we are invited to see her and her educational style and standpoint as both "bad" and slightly villainous. This film is written so that we see Kresswood, if not the larger system of schooling in which she functions, as dehumanizing people.

In many ways, however, we can see Kresswood as a symbol for our culture and her social vision can be rationalized. She has done well to understand the "way things are" and she has fought significant battles to be in a position of enough power to have the

considerable influence she has. As she forges on there are a significant number of students who will socially and materially benefit from her efforts and guidance. We might well argue that by ridding her school of misfits and rebels and people who are just not making the grade she is serving the best interests of a great many in her school and culture. The ones put out of the school are more quickly positioned in the school of "hard knocks" where they will learn the only kinds of real-life skills which will allow them to survive. It might be argued even that by being forced out of the school and into the "real world" these people will be at significant advantage over other students who are similarly "misfit," "rebel," and "not making the grade" but who are kept in their school situations and who are not learning the even harder knocks they must learn outside of school in order to survive.

Another significant position and vision presented in this film can be identified in the two characters Commissioner Hunter, Mark's father, and Ms. Emerson, the young English and Writing teacher at Hubert Humphrey High. Through the voices and activities of these two characters the film audience is presented with a vision of education which is at odds with and somewhat alternative to Kresswood's conservative view. As we shall see, however, their goals and vision of the world are hardly radical and do not demand much of the audience for fairly wholehearted support.

Mark's father is not an unfamiliar character to us. In the film we learn early on that Mark's father has come to Arizona as the youngest commissioner of schools in the state. We also learn that his

father was one of the radicals of the sixties, fighting for certain causes of social justice and reform. His involvement in such presumably radical thinking and activity has softened with the years, however, and Commissioner Hunter is productively working within the system, complete with middle class profession, middle class family, and middle class lifestyle. In the film when Mark's mother comments on how out-of-touch she feels living in Arizona, Mark's father responds: *"We didn't move out here to stay in touch. This is a nice place to live and I'm making good money . . . "* His partner responds, *"You were always fighting against the system, and now you are the system."*

Hunter represents for us the well-meaning, but primarily self-interested, individual who has opted out of acting out of his deepest social conscience and, instead, has chosen a safe and bunkered-in life in the suburban sprawl. But it is hard for us to dislike Hunter. He is like a great number of us who want some semblance of the "good life" and who want some meaningful work in the world. It is clear that Hunter desires security for himself and his family. He is well intended and somewhat socially aware. We can hardly blame him for enjoying the power and money that come with his position because we understand those desires in ourselves. And, as we understand about Principal Kresswood, Hunter's position of power could not have been won easily. In Mark's father we can appreciate both his understated liberalism and his success, which affirm our meritocratic understanding of how the world works even as we are

aware that he has for the most part, in Tocqueville's terms, retreated into a small circle of family and friends.

What is puzzling is that Mark's father is never presented in a more critical light. We never know what possibly radical views he once held. The audience is left to accept Hunter's choice to move from the fray of his more challenging social concerns and a more challenging urban New York life to suburban Arizona. We are left, as an audience, to approve of Hunter. He is a hero of the film. After all, it is Mark's father who takes the power away from the corrupt principal Kresswood. And so, as an audience, we are shown that such basic school by school policing of evils is an acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, professional occupation for someone who has had radical commitments and affiliations in the past. The lifestyle of Hunter and his family is soft enough, and it is no doubt desirable for a great number of audience members. There is, however, nothing radical about his role and if his role portrays a liberal standpoint, it is a very tentative and relatively unchallenging liberalism. In the end we know that Hunter is the system, transformation is not the goal, the goal is simply the orderly governance of the system as it stands.

Most of the adults we meet at Hubert Humphrey High are presented in such a conservative or liberal light. For a potentially different role model in the educational system we are offered only one significant exception. This exception is the young English and Writing teacher Ms. Emerson. Emerson is the teacher who is amused at the broadcasts of Hard Harry. She is also the only school member

to see these broadcasts as something other than a dangerous threat to the functioning of the school. We see her as the one school professional who is willing to listen openly to what Hard Harry is presenting. In her classroom, Emerson is similarly open to the voices of her students. She is not merely interested in the intellects of her students, but instead is interested in and values the internal and personal lives of her students. As she encourages one of her classes she suggests that when writing each class member "*lead with your heart and not with your head.*"

Ms. Emerson is obviously the "good" teacher in this film. She is constructed as the ideal teacher. She is so willing to stand for justice in the school that she is fired for her outspokenness in rebuking the vice principal after he attacks a student. (We must ask ourselves, however, who in a similar position, regardless of conservative or liberal viewpoint, could conscientiously do otherwise?) After she is fired she encourages Mark--and tacitly expresses her understanding that Mark and Hard Harry are one and the same--and lets him know that she thought that she could make a difference and that she believes that she was mistaken, that making a difference in today's schools is an impossibility.

In the end, however, she makes a crucial contribution which leads to the ousting of the principal, Loretta Kresswood. After her dismissal Emerson enters the main office of the school and steals the files which functionally incriminate Kresswood in the last scenes of the film. We must ask, however, what kind of a bold gesture this is. The audience is aware that Emerson has already been fired. At this

point Emerson has nothing to lose. Yes, she breaks the rules, but she does not break the rules from within the system or in a way which significantly threatens her present position. As a role model she displays bravery and opposition, but she never does this while she is within the system.

There is little that is radical in Emerson's role and what we see, instead, is the presentation of a fairly strong liberal position and voice. She is certainly committed to certain kinds of justice, but there is no indication that she sees anything fundamentally flawed with the system of education except to the extent that educational practices dehumanize and silence students. She represents for the audience, I believe, a compassionate and yet conservative law and order approach to change within the system. Furthermore, Emerson's power and goals within the classroom are limited to merely encouraging students to find their voices and then to express these voices in whatever way they find appropriate. Hers is a value-neutral affirmation of all voice and in no part of the film is she presented in a more critically challenging way.

Hunter and Emerson are important characters for our critical consideration, however. They represent all of us who are struggling in systems of education across the land for whom current educational practices are less than satisfactory and also for whom these institutions are our places of professional practice and livelihood in the world. They underscore, to varying degrees, the pain and difficulty of our dilemma that to work in any institution is to be significantly complicit in the system, with all of the accompanying

injustices of the institution. Before continuing with a discussion of these issues it is important to see if we can locate a more radical position presented in the film.

Here we must turn to Mark, who speaks as Hard Harry on his underground radio show. Mark offers us the most radical and critical position in the film. He is the great hero of the film and it is because of his actions that a general justice is restored to Hubert Humphrey High. Mark's critique of the world goes beyond a liberal one in that he sees that the ways we are living are fundamentally flawed. We can believe that Mark would want the injustices of Hubert Humphrey to be redressed but we are also aware that the problems Mark addresses are far more critical and comprehensive than the injustices occurring in a single school system. As Mark states early in the film:

*You know what I feel like? The whole country is one inch from saying: That's it. Forget it.' Think about it. Everything's polluted: the environment, the government, the schools, you name it . . . . Speaking of schools, I was walking down the hallowed halls the other day and I asked myself, 'Is there life after high school?' 'Cause I can't face tomorrow, let alone a whole year of this shit. You see--there's nothing to do anymore. All the great deeds have been done, all the great themes have been used up and turned into theme parks. So I don't exactly find it cheerful to be living in a totally exhausted decade where there is nothing to look forward to and nobody to look up to.*

Mark's expressions of despair and outrage are radical, they demand that things be done in very different ways, that life and living be reconceptualized and redrawn. And what he states undoubtedly

resonates with us, the film audience. We know how difficult it is to find a role model, someone to look up to and to emulate. We have cultural heroes falling around us all the time in scandals of every sort. We hardly even ask basic decency of any of our leaders anymore as such decency seems beyond their possible range of actions. And all the great themes are little more than theme parks or fodder for endless commodification and marketing strategies.

Even though we can see Mark's understanding of the problems as radical in some important ways, Mark's vision for change is decidedly limited and largely individualistic. Consider Mark's last speech in the film:

*Listen, we're all worried. We're all in pain. That just comes with having eyes and having ears. But just remember one thing, it can't get any worse, it can only get better. I mean, high school is the bottom, being a teenager sucks. But that's the point. Surviving it is the whole point. Quitting is not going to make you strong. Living will. So hang on and hang in there. Oh, I know all about the hating and the sneering. I'm a member of the 'Why Bother?' generation myself. But why did I bother to come out here tonight? And why did you? I mean, its time. It begins with us, not with politicians, the experts, the teachers, but with us--with you and with me, the ones who need it most. I believe, with everything that's in me, that the whole world is longing for a healing. Even the trees, and the earth itself are crying out for it. You can hear it everywhere. It's the kind of healing I desperately needed and finally feel is beginning with you .*

A number of important things occur in this speech. First we are again let know that pain and despair are part of our current condition. Mark reaffirms his position that if we do have eyes and

ears, in other words, if we are not in complete denial of our present social context and position, we will be in pain. From this despair, however, he draws a very strange conclusion. With no explanation or justification he tells us that things cannot get any worse, that they can only get better. This hardly fits with the version of the world he has been expressing and exploring throughout the film and it hardly fits with the experiences of the film audience who live in a world whose horror and terror are getting worse and threaten even our human animal existence.

In this speech, however, Mark tells us that there is some hope and power in merely surviving. We might well remember Lasch's critique of a survival mentality and how such a mentality forces us once again back onto ourselves in an isolated and alienated corner of the world. Indeed, Mark's vision is a solitary one. It is about people acting in highly unrelated and individualistic ways against structural and cultural challenges.

When Mark tells his audience that he is beginning to experience some healing in his life that he desperately needs, the "you" he attributes the healing to has a dual meaning. On the one hand, he is speaking to his general radio audience. How, we must ask, has any healing occurred through the audience? We know only that people have been listening to his show and have been activated by his words. Such healing has to do, it seems fairly clear, with a liberal version of the world which holds that if we can express our individual voices broadly and fully enough our world will somehow experience significant healing. On the other hand, we see Mark

looking into Nora's eye's as he says "you." In the film we know that Mark has gotten the girl. Earlier he has affirmed that one of the jobs of a teenager is to get a pretty girlfriend and by film's end he has achieved this goal. So, finally, Mark's healing can be seen as little more than getting for himself the bits and pieces of a highly individualized "good life."

And so what of a radical social vision in this film? I suspect that most audience members will want to act more like Emerson than Kresswood. The problem is that there is very little significant difference between the two. Mark does offer a fairly radical critique of our culture: it is challenging and it is oppositional. His vision for redressing such ills are hardly radical, and we should not be surprised to find that Mark grows up to be very similar to his father, a person with certain radical understandings and leanings, but whose social vision and field of action are primarily individualistic and liberal in character.

Whether the view of the world, as presented in the film, is conservative, liberal, or marginally radical, most all the ways of addressing problems are based on a highly individualistic notion of change. Following is a discussion of some of the tensions in the film between the place of the individual and the place of a larger community.

**On alienation and the cult of individualism versus group  
commitment and community solidarity**

Cynicism and despair are significant parts of what we must daily address in our professional school lives, both in the lives of our students and in our own professional and personal lives. Much of how we address this cynicism and despair is related to how we conceptualize ourselves as individuals and as members of larger communities. A major weakness in the film **Pump Up The Volume** is the absence of any substantial vision which sees constructive change in a society as occurring from the activities and influences of a unified and aware group of citizens or professionals acting in solidarity. It is important, then, to explore how social responsibility is presented in this film.

This film makes it clear that alienation and despair are endemic in our culture. One of Mark's first letters asks why he isn't more cheerful. With his response we are invited into Mark's personal predicament and view of himself in the world:

*Why aren't I more cheerful? I'll tell you since you asked. I just arrived in this stupid suburb. I have no friends, no money, no car, no license. If I did have a car license all I could do is drive to the mall, play some video games and, if I get lucky, find a joint, get stoned and get stupid.*

Mark's alienation is the pivotal subject experience and position in this film. Without it we would not have a film. It is Mark's struggle with and rejection of alienation which makes the film.

In the following interchange Mark is losing steam. He has acted boldly and his bold action is breeding controversy and dissent throughout his school and in the larger community. People are questioning things. Everyday school life is becoming increasingly messy. Throughout each school day students are challenging authority and organizing disruptive pranks. Vandalism is marking the face of the campus in the form of slogans and oppositional images.

Mark and Nora are walking together at school and are confronted with the wall-sized slogan painted on the school: "THE TRUTH IS A VIRUS." Nora is excited; Mark begins to shrink into despair as he begins to realize the effect he is having on people in his community. It is in this interchange that Nora raises the issue of Mark's responsibility to the people he has been speaking to. Nora turns to Mark: *"This is deep. Your message is out there."* Mark responds: *"What is with you? I'm not going on anymore. That's it , it's over."* Nora replies: *"But you're so close."* Mark counters: *"Close to what?"* Then Nora: *"To getting your message out."* And then Mark responds in anger as he refuses Nora's implications that he has any responsibility to anyone other than himself: *"This is my life you're screwing around with."*

It is at this point that Nora directly appeals to Mark's social responsibility as she confronts Mark with accepting the role he has played in stirring things up in the lives of a great many people in his community: *"Not any more it isn't. This is everyone's life, Mark. You can't leave it like this. People are confused."* With heartfelt and

solemn clarity Mark responds: *"Well, so am I. Things are fucked up and crazy."* As audience members we can hardly keep from feeling compassion for Mark's position, for the position of students in communities everywhere around us, and, indeed, for our own positions of despair and confusion.

It is Nora who reminds us that these problems are not fundamentally individual ones, they are, in some ways, structural ones. What is interesting for the audience is that Nora's vision and response to the problems being faced are also primarily individualistic in character. In her response to Mark we hear a certain structural critique but are offered a response that has to do with the actions of a single powerful voice *"No, the whole world is fucked up, just like you said. Don't you see? That you're the voice, you're the voice we're waiting for?"* Nora is looking for a hero. And she has found hers in Mark. She has told us that she sees him as "voice crying out in the wilderness."

A problem continues to plague us, however, in relation to this film as well as to our daily lives. How are we to act if we are beginning to be clear that individual action will never really be enough to confront the challenges that we name and address. In Bellah's book **Habits of the Heart** we are told again and again how people have come to believe that they are coming together in socially and politically significant ways but for the most part are living very isolated and individualistic lives. If even the radicalism that is being described in a film like **Pump Up The Volume** is so circumscribed

by such an extreme individualism, what potential and power can there really be in such texts of popular culture?

In the end of the film Mark encourages all of his audience members to "*seize the air.*" He calls for people to take to the air waves with their own radio shows, shows that are personally meaningful to them and which are formatted as talk shows. This seems to be the great hope of the film: that expressing our individual voices is what is needed to help heal our broken world. How are we to appreciate this call to voice in any substantial way? We live in a culture in which the Oprah's and the Donahue's fill the channels. On the one hand we might actually benefit from listening to the experiences of the people presented on the shows and on the other hand we are aware of and laugh at the circus side-show quality of these programs. We are not fooled for a minute that these shows are about transforming our social and cultural reality in any significant or radical way. In fact, we are more apt to understand that the best that might come from these shows are a few pointers to, in Mark's words, help us "*hang in there,*" not because the "hanging in" will in some way transform the world but because the "hanging in" is all we can do to survive.

If our sense of social transformation is about real interdependence and community commitment and solidarity and the end of social isolation, then this film really does not address this at all. At best, perhaps, this film and other such films do place us in a more awkward awareness of the contradictions in our social reality and thus challenge us to address these contradictions in more

satisfactory and meaningful ways. In any event we are left with the challenge of how to create a meaningful and powerful forum in which to act our deepest commitments with ourselves and our most critically engaged views of the world.

Now I turn to the ways that a number of four students converse with the film text **Pump Up The Volume**.

## **PART TWO--Student Educators Converse With The Text**

Earlier I have stated that it is only by taking up the challenges of creating conversations relating to the particular contradictions and tensions of any text of popular culture that we might begin to develop a more critically meaningful, as well as potentially emancipatory, dialogue among ourselves with such texts. As we shall see in this section of this chapter, however, such conversational spaces are unfamiliar and difficult for us. Although these student teachers are able to speak and recreate some of the contradictions and tensions presented within such a popular culture text, it is much more difficult for them to become aware that they are speaking within, and indeed living within, these popular texts.

This section of Chapter Five is centered on the conversations which occurred between four student teachers and myself after an informal viewing of **Pump Up The Volume**. The four participants were all student teachers at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's School of Education. All four students were in the last days of the required social and philosophical foundations of

education course *The Institution of Education*. The four student teachers--all between the ages of twenty and twenty-six--had all received at least a general introduction to critical thinking as it relates to educational processes and pedagogy. All four, two women and two men, had some years of living and working experience between their leaving high school and coming to the university. All four students reported that they felt in some ways "called" to the teaching profession--they want to be teachers not merely for professional efficacy, but also for the ways in which they might provide meaningful differences and support in their students' lives. These student teachers, all white and from reportedly stable working class backgrounds, are not dissimilar to a great proportion of student teachers from UNC-G as well as in other schools of education throughout the country.

Four white student teachers from a state supported school of education in North Carolina in no way provide a representational sample of student teachers in this country. Furthermore, this work is in no way intended to supplying a quantitative analysis of student teacher attitudes to the film **Pump Up The Volume**. The assumption I make is that all four of these teachers are as deeply entrenched and embedded in cultural forms and contradictions as the rest of us. What is importantly similar among these people is that each of them is thinking educationally and has had a rudimentary introduction to critical thinking and critical pedagogy. From such a group and in such a conversation related to a popular

film text I am looking at the particular kinds of critical consciousness which emerge.

I am interested in a number of questions. What are the kinds of themes that resonate with these future teachers after a viewing of the film? How do these student teachers raise and address certain powerful tensions and contradictions in this film, if, indeed, they articulate these tensions and contradictions at all. How do they express the tensions between cynicism and despair, on the one hand, and hopefulness and possibility, on the other? Do these student educators see how desirable role models in this film are represented as radical and novel in some senses, but are also presented as standard and largely sexist and classist? How do these student teachers talk about alienation and individualism as part of school experience and how, in conversation with the film text, do they see group commitment and community solidarity as a way toward liberation and emancipation in this school setting? Finally, I am most interested in the ways these student teachers articulate the contradictory vision of the film, a vision which is simultaneously about a critique of this school, all schools, and the society at large as being fundamentally flawed and alienating and in dire need of radical and revolutionary transformation and which is also about the kind of small scale liberal/conservative reform described in the previous part of this chapter which is intended to clean up the ills of this particular school system and which has been corrupted by the deeds of a single unscrupulous principal.

What emerges from this conversation is much less some clear appreciation or denial of this particular film text as a source for potentially improved critical literacy and pedagogy in the classroom than it is an illustration of the difficulties related to bringing any text of popular culture into a classroom for the purposes of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. What becomes increasingly clear in this conversation are the conflicting sensibilities of the student teachers' experiences with this film text. Not surprisingly, many of their responses fit within the conflicting constructs Antonio Gramsci terms "good sense" and "bad sense." This is a kind of dual sensibility in which critical clear-sightedness coexists with an acritical close-mindedness.

On the one hand these future teachers are remarkably clear-sighted in the ways they conceptualize their positions and potentials as teachers in our current teaching and schooling contexts. On the other hand they are simultaneously overconfident and underconfident about their potential abilities to make significant differences in the ways they enact their educational practice in relation to the institutionalized injustices of the system they see. Furthermore, and in relation to their critical reading of the film text **Pump Up The Volume**, these students are only marginally aware of the tensions and contradictions which are presented in the film or those same contradictions and tensions in their own educational discourse. It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that within these conversations I find the germ of potentially transformative and critical sensibilities. But, at the same time, these sensibilities are so

tacit and underdeveloped as to be not much more than psychological irritations within the consciousnesses and consciences of the student educators.

I do not wish to minimize the potential power of the critical sensibilities of these people. The contradiction exists, however, that in some significant ways critical sensibility is all there and is not there at all. On the one hand they know everything, they have all experienced the kinds of alienation and despair that is represented in the film. They know first hand how degrading it is to live a school life filled with largely meaningless and repititious work, a life in which some of the most meaningful and important things are generally silenced and devalued. On the other hand they know very little in a critical sense. They are seeking teaching positions in the schools and, while suspicious and critical of some of our current practices of schooling, they are invested in believing in some inherent and acritical "goodness" of our schooling institutions. Such mixed, although not altogether unexpected, critical experiences with these student teachers and this film underscore some of the many difficulties involved in even beginning to appropriate popular film texts in the service of developing critical literacy in the classroom toward a more liberational pedagogy. What follows are some of the conversations with these student teachers as related to the particular contradictory tensions presented from the film in Part One of this chapter.

### **On cynicism and despair versus hope and possibility**

One of the most powerful aspects of the responses and conversations of the student teachers is their particular ways of describing and conceptualizing hope. Hope for these student teachers is both problematic and contradictory. On the one hand, all of the conversation participants esteemed hopefulness most highly in their lives and work. Achieving active experiences of hoping and working hopefully was almost beyond these student teachers, however, although their desire for a more hopeful living and being was evident throughout their conversations. Ideas and possibilities of hope were most always closely followed by concerns and experiences of despair.

**Pump Up The Volume** did well to excite and proffer hope for these people. And the students were not unaware of the pleasure involved in screening a film which is explicitly about activities of hope, possibility, and transformation. Said one after commenting on the disparity between the good intentions of everyday people and the staid and disempowering everydayness of their lived reality:

But it's nice to be able to live that [the hope of the film] for two hours. Its almost like you're living in him [Mark, the main character] and you're saying 'Yeah, yeah, we can do this, we can do this!' (Transcript, 3)

The hope expressed, however, was expressed with a realization that this is only a film, this is a place for me to live my fantasies before I return to the everyday world.

Another student teacher responded in a way that demonstrated a similar appreciation for the power of the film and an experience of the difficulty of activating the hope within the film.

But you're not going to go out and do what he did. At least you can go out and live that [the experience of facing and addressing alienation, voiceless and despair in a liberational and transformative way] for a couple of hours. (Transcript, 3)

This person highlights what I understand to be one of the most limiting dimensions of popular culture texts. The film, or any other popular text, has seductive and erotic features which lead the experiencing subject into particular forms of pleasure. In this case, which is typical of film experience, the film brackets the subject experience into a particular form and frame of time in such a way that the desire for a different reality is experienced only within the time bracket of the film. Furthermore, films are presented in ways so that the tensions and contradictions which excite us are also difficult to locate and articulate.

A significant problem with the "good feel" of this film is that this euphoric hopefulness is short-lived. When I asked what should a person do when they lose the hope that the film helped engender, a student responded that you go and see the film again. In such a way, however, the film stands as a pleasure commodity with little or no

lasting resonance. If our hopefulness is dependent on our being within the immediate experience of the consumption of the popular film commodity, we are unable to live any real life hopeful relation to that film. The hopefulness becomes an illusory and transitory experience that we pay for but do not expect or believe that we might take into other parts of our living and acting in the world. This seems to me to be a nihilistic kind of hopefulness. The critical nature of hope, as presented in the film, exists only as illusion so long as it remains safely within the boundaries of that particular popular product.

This is, perhaps, one of the ways that the popular is such a powerful hegemonizing force in our culture in relation to challenging and oppositional notions and imperatives. So long as these oppositional and challenging ideas can be presented in such a way that people consuming them are satisfied to think and be aware of these critical presentations within the specific boundaries of these products, the oppositional or radical consciousness presented within these texts can have only marginally significant overlap into the ways in which people live their lives.

In the film, the time is one of hope, possibility and transformation based on the bold, but nevertheless ordinary and accessible, actions of a character against an alienating and silencing educational system. At the end of the bracketed time, however, the experiencing subject returns to an untransformed world. A ticket price was paid and the film goer "got their money's worth" to some degree or another, received pleasure to some degree or another. This

is the closest to oppositional behavior and activity that most of us achieve in our lives--either in relation and identification with the fictional portrayal of such activity or the media portrayal of certain events. Important to our discussion is whether such experience contributes to our greater social action in the world.

In relation to hegemonic consciousness it can be argued that such a film-going subject may be even less inclined to oppositional behavior in their world after viewing such a film. Such an argument is based on an understanding of the ways in which popular culture addresses very real issues of discontentment and despair, and in so doing, extracts the transformative and oppositional energy from the subjects of these cultural forms. In fact, such cultural forms may breed and encourage a passivity which allows experiencing subjects an illusion of heightened social and critical awareness while actually displacing energy and activity which might oppose and challenge established patterns of social injustice.

Hope is essentially desired by these student teachers, nevertheless, and they were quick to remind me of this. One participant identified with the main character Mark and, after apologizing for possible egotism in such an identification, commented on the contradictions of the character:

I think I identify with the dualism in his character of hope and desperation at the same time. Why? Why did he hope things would be better? Because basically if he lost that hope, then he's lost everything. (Transcript, 4)

This participant is reluctant to despair and is ready to identify with a character who acts with hope in the face of overwhelming odds and with marked asymmetries of power between himself and the school establishment. Like Mark in the film, there is not particularly much to hope for or on which to base hope, but there is some significant power in continuing on. This is a dismal kind of hopefulness, however, because it is without some greater developing vision of a more just and compassionate world which is built by our own carefully constructed intentions and actions.

**On role models and social vision: conservative, liberal, and radical presentations**

One of the more powerful dimensions of this conversation deals with the action and qualities of a "good teacher." One participant found the teacher Ms. Emerson, the "good teacher" of the film, to be the conduit for hopeful transformation in the film:

I like her role. I like that eventually she did speak out and that she was the kind of connector to the students and hope in that system. (Transcript, 6)

All of the participants see the role of teacher as being one of communicator and bringer of hope in a world where hope is often elusive if not already snuffed out. Their vision of a good teacher, however, is a liberal one. They do not see the teacher as a

professional who must be committed to an ongoing critical appraisal of pedagogical practice in the schools.

The student teachers praised this particular teacher in the film for her courage (she is fired from her job for her outspokenness and for challenging authority), her compassion for her students, and her ability to identify with the lives of her students. This teacher is young and has not outlived her idealism. Perhaps most important to these participants was this teacher's commitment to encouraging student voices in her classroom. As one participant comments:

She was, you know, trying to encourage him [Mark] to have that voice in the classroom and I feel that's really the important role of a teacher. (Transcript, 6-7)

It seems that for these student teachers encouraging students' voices is the sufficient goal and activity of the "good teacher."

What seems missing from these student teachers' analysis of Ms. Emerson is some kind of critique of her value-neutral stance as she encourages students to find the voices of their hearts. There is no indication in these conversations that the participants are asking for critical understandings and moral challenge within their students. It seems that finding and promoting student voices, no matter what these voices might be saying, is enough. The student teachers do not see themselves as people responsibly involved in encouraging and guiding difficult moral and political conversations within their classroom, but instead are concerned with the challenges--and they are considerable--of getting their students to say anything at all

which is personally meaningful or significant to them. In ways that have been discussed in Part One of this chapter we must see this educational vision as liberal at its most extreme.

The participants were generally suspicious of the general role of teacher as conveyor of information. This is probably not surprising given that all the participants were nearing the end of their term in the undergraduate course in sociology of education and critical pedagogy. In the following passage a student simultaneously rejects the banking method of education while advocating a teacher attitude which begins to take into account the real concerns, interests and needs of students:

[For a student] it would be easy to take a piece of paper and write down a lot of stuff about **Beowulf**, but the paper doesn't feel and the paper doesn't think and the paper doesn't have other things like in the life of a student. So [as a teacher] it's just important to remember that you're not dealing with a bucket that you can pour stuff into. You're dealing with somebody that has feelings, and fears, and anxieties, and desires that are exclusive to whatever you have to say. And that [as a teacher] you're not doing the most important thing in the world [for all of the students]. (Transcript, 23)

While I believe that looking into texts like **Beowulf** has great possibilities for addressing the everyday lives of students, I am well aware that many such texts are presented as another dead, but required, part of the standard curriculum. What I find remarkable about this statement is that it begs teachers to be aware of their possibilities *and* limitations within a classroom situation. All too

frequently young teachers believe that they must somehow be all things to all people in the classroom situation--a belief reinforced by burgeoning government imperatives of what all a teacher should be. Most of these student teachers are aware that the things that go on in the classroom are not going to be the most important things in their students' lives. They actively reject a banking concept of education, at least on theoretical grounds, and respect their students as more than so much passive flesh needing to be filled with so much formal school knowledge.

It may very well be that a teacher who takes into account their own limitations with regard to what they are able to accomplish with people, and in relation to the desires and subject interests of the students, may be in a much better position to succeed in their own understanding and configuration of what it means to be a teacher. In response to the previous passage another student responded:

I'm really glad he said that because someone, a teacher, did say to me once when I asked her, "What do you do?" "I'm a teacher," [she said]. "Well, what do you teach?" "Children" was the response. You know, it was like yeah! It wasn't what I was expecting but I thought it was kind of neat. (Transcript, 23)

I do not believe that any of us would be surprised that in our technological and profit and business driven society a teacher who is primarily interested in nurturing human relations in their classroom would be desired and appreciated in a classroom. The notion of teaching humans versus teaching a particular body of information is

the kind of position which begins to deny standard forms of entrenched alienation and silence within the schools.

The kind of affirmation in the statement "I teach children" is part of where I see hope in the school system. Much of this work is about trying to make elements of critical theory more accessible to rank-and-file teachers and their students. What I am finding more and more is that such accessibility exists within the lives and experiences of people who are doing the teaching and who are being taught. Problems arise in valuing activities which are not based on specific competencies and "hard" educational curricula. Problems arise in finding time to communicate and talk about the important issues in teachers' and students' lives. Problems arise in beginning to revalue the human in an increasingly technological and automated world of big business and high profits. Unfortunately for many, or even most, school teachers their school schedules are so packed with mandatory and "teacher-proof" curriculum that there is very little room to address the students in human or emancipatory ways and still maintain their jobs.

The students also addressed their own professional and job insecurities in relation to the kind of speaking out a teacher might do in response to perceived injustices in their school environment:

The dilemma for someone in that situation is 'Do I quiet myself just enough to stay in the system, or what?' I mean, she stood up and lost her job . . . . As a teacher do you shut up just long enough to stay in there, you know. I imagine it's a real dilemma. (Transcript, 7)

These student teachers seemed to be caught between wanting to speak out in difficult and unjust situations and wanting to maintain their jobs, not only for the financial implications, but also because they foresaw losing their jobs under such circumstances and also losing the potential effectiveness they would have with their students in their classrooms.

While all the students believed that the film was quite powerful and raised many important issues related to education most said that they would be unwilling to show the film in a high school class setting. I wondered why. One student responded that they would not show the film if they wanted to keep their job with the provision: "Oh yeah, unless I'm going to run up to the TV and cut down the volume every time there's a four-letter word." There was strong agreement among the participants on this issue.

The contradiction arises in the value that this conversation group placed on the role of coarse language and explicit body and sexual references earlier in the conversation. The group was in quite strong agreement that such expressions were absolutely essential to the film in breaking down the barriers for the audience to look at and listen to the real and personally important concerns of students in schools. If these student teachers are going into schools with a strong belief that they are not allowed to talk about the things which really matter to their students and in ways which are accessible and comfortable to their students but are still committed to these activities, they will certainly suffer a number of tensions given this dilemma.

The educational outlook for these students is not good. They tacitly see themselves as isolated and alone in their professional educational settings and this belief will only encourage and normalize this isolation. These people do not talk about teachers coming together in political ways to work for the kinds of justice in the schools which they affirm. Alone and without an understanding or belief that a public forum may present them with new possibilities for support and power in their professional contexts, the outlook for these people's work in education is bleak, indeed. They long for a professional life of meaning and significance. They have a developing moral sensibility in relation to what is really important in the lives of students and what really hurts students. Much of this understanding is related to their own school experiences. They have, however, a very limited skill in talking about these issues, in seeing and discussing the contradictions in which they are suspended as teachers in the educational system. Finally, however, their vision of the world is so dominated by individualism that it is hard to see them coming together with other colleagues to begin creating the kinds of pedagogy they can best intention.

### **On alienation and the cult of individualism versus group commitment and community solidarity**

These student teachers are deeply committed to seeing themselves as individuals. Their previous educational journey has been one of individual challenge and activity. They live in a culture which values

the individual most highly. And the challenges they face in relation to their professional life in the schools are marked by attitudes of individualism and isolation. They see their battles as ones which must be fought in a kind of social and professional vacuum. The only kind of community consciousness I detected in their conversations was related to the body language in the film, and how this brought people together.

A number of participants commented on the fairly extreme use of coarse and profane language in the film and seemed to believe that this was essential for the film. Said one student teacher:

It's like a wake-up call . . . . It's because a lot of voices are so stifled that they have to go a little bit overboard to be heard. Like when you have a group that is speaking out against something . . . they have to do things like break windows and make noises and do things that they would probably not do under normal circumstances because it is the only way that people are going to stand up and listen to them. That's the only way that they are going to be heard. (Transcript, 8)

There is an attitude among this group that the coarse language helped to break the silence for the characters within the film as well as for the audience:

It seems to me that there are a large cluster of taboo topics. Things you don't say . . . . It seems to me that profanity and talking about existential turmoil are taboo. Once you get inside the school and say "Listen, get buck naked and fuck," then you've broken that barrier and you can start [talking about] the existential turmoils of schools. . . . So I think within the context of this movie [the profanity] was like chipping the rock from the bottom of the dam so that the entire thing could just

collapse and all the water could run through and we could talk about suicide, and we could talk about masturbation, and we can talk about alienation, we can talk about the school sucks etc., etc. (Transcript, 11)

This tells me that these students find it difficult to see people coming together in social meaningful ways except in a kind of violent or wildly disorganized protest. Indeed, our culture presents very few images or stories of people coming together differently.

While there is a belief in using rough language to open up an important critical sphere and potentially reduce isolation, one participant told the story of a particular freshman student who is in a Biology class which he deplors:

There's this guy in my Biology class who is a freshman, eighteen years old and he's hating this Biology class with all his heart. And he sits beside me in class and every once in a while he'll just scream. I mean he'll just be very loud with some kind of odd remark or odd sound. And it's like he's looking, he's frustrated, he's sick of it, he's voicing it but it's not an effective voice, unfortunately. It's effective for him in that little moment. (Transcript, 17)

The student in the Biology class is simultaneously admired for his coming to his own voice and is disliked for the disturbing and disruptive influence he has on the rest of the class. Undoubtedly other students in the class are experiencing similar kinds of despair and struggle. But the student relating this tale does not see this voice as something that might be amplified through the despair of others in the class or beyond. Again, the individual is alone and

isolated. There is no vision of a group consciousness which can express particular voices in amplified and communal ways.

During our discussion of the issues related to the film's use of a large amount of profanity and coarse body language the matter of the body at school is raised.

I found it interesting that these student teachers wavered between speaking quite candidly among themselves and with me on their ideas and reflections on the film and speaking in a more guarded and formal "university-speak" which sounded, perhaps, more appropriate to formal discussion but which seemed to obscure their more candid and resonating experiences with the film. I was aware of the tilt in the power asymmetry in my direction in relation to the group: although not their lecturer, I was a lecturer in the course they were completing. The conversations we had, however, were not as rich as I had hoped. Although the students were not reluctant to speak, their discourse was limited both by their language and the lack of experience they have had in articulating critical cultural experience.

These student teachers see themselves as alone and isolated and they will bring this attitude with them into their professional school lives. They will hope, but will not hope for anything in particular, because, as one related, without hope "you have nothing left."

## Conclusions And Outlook

Perhaps a most difficult dilemma in these student educators' lives is the interplay between their moral consciences and their social and intellectual consciousnesses and how the development of this interplay relates to their critical pedagogical activity. These student educators, like a great many of their peers, are intensely well-intended and well-meaning. They desire liberational and emancipatory classrooms to the extent that they can articulate modes and dynamics of justice and injustice within educational settings. They are aware that current modes of educational practice are frequently unjust from their root constructions and are more often about silencing the critical and moral thinking and voices of their students than they are about encouraging them. And to varying degrees they are also aware that current educational practice stands as a great sorting station whose ends are fundamentally about deciding which students are able and will achieve some version of "the good life" and which most probably will not. Furthermore, these student teachers are generally aware that the kinds of social practices taught in schools, both explicitly and implicitly, do much more to inhibit any critical rationality in themselves and their students than to promote such activity.

And so, for these students both conscience and consciousness are alive. It is my growing understanding, however, from the above conversation as well as a host of other such interchanges with other student educators, that these people in their professional teaching

activity will have only marginal success in developing any substantive critical thinking and critical literacy in their classroom practices through the use of texts of popular culture, and more specifically popular film texts. It is not that these texts are without resonating power for exploring and challenging critical issues in a public and educational way. I believe that they are and I hope the student conversations with these texts demonstrate how potent and laden such films are with these possibilities. Nor is it that there is anything "wrong" with the abilities of these student teachers, real and potential, to utilize such texts in critically meaningful ways within their classrooms. The conversations I have presented show that the discourses of student teachers are rich with critical tensions and partial awarenesses.

My lack of optimism for the use of popular film texts in classrooms toward a more critical pedagogy and critical literacy is related to the lack of awareness on the part of the teachers of the contradictions within their own professional discourse relating to this film. But then again, why should student teachers have any such abilities or awareness? They have been raised in the same critically barren educational environment as most of us have been. They have been systematically taught that contradictions and paradoxes should be eliminated at all costs, that, in fact, education is about resolving the difficult and contradictory, that education is about finding answers and solutions which are well-defined and which fit as neatly as possible into systems and rules based on positivistic notions of reality.

So, what has become increasingly clear to me from these students' conversations with the film text **Pump Up The Volume** is the lack of conscious awareness of the contradictions which are embedded within their own particular ways of languaging and describing possibilities within their own professional educational practice as related to critical issues presented within the film. Unfortunately, I believe that it is through the exploration and wrestling with these contradictory tensions of experience that the greatest terrain of ideological and practical struggle, and potential transformation, might be won in these students' professional lives. Furthermore, I hold that it is within these contradictory tensions that students and teachers alike may begin to meet the challenges and difficulties of the ongoing construction and reification of their and our personal and political subjectivities.

I wish to underscore how essential are the contradictions and tensions within our own consciousness and consciences in coming together in critically powerful and meaningful ways toward some more just and transformed vision of the world. Also, I hold that it is through embracing the challenges and difficulties of these contradictory tensions, within our moral and political consciousness and conscience, as well as within our personal and professional actions in the world, that teachers and students might begin coming together in ways which are radically different and potentially more emancipatory than anything we currently understand as standard classroom activity and practice. Such work demands, among other things, an acceptance that we are all, students and teachers alike,

politically and morally active and responsible in the world. Further, we must accept that schools are necessarily the place for moral and political discourse and action. Also we must accept that both teachers and students are involved in professional activity in school settings and that an essential part of any responsible professional activity is a developing awareness of our own moral and political consciences and consciousnesses as well as some developing vision of what kind of a world we would like to live in.

I hope it is becoming increasingly clear that what I am writing about is fundamentally contradictory in itself. I am arguing that only by energetically and tenaciously pursuing the contradictory tensions in our own consciences and consciousnesses can we begin to live less alienated and politically powerless lives. At the same time, however, most of our cultural directives teach us not only to fear and despise the contradictory, but to either resolve or flee all contradictions, and with all our might. As individuals and as a larger community we have grown to desire certainty and resolution more than anything. In our increasingly despairing and randomly dangerous world we seek psychological and physical security more than ever. More than anything we want things that offer us safety, experiences and thoughts that help set our minds and bodies at ease.

Within the teaching professions there can hardly be a more certain and secure kind of pedagogy than that embodied in a banking concept of education or that which is based on an updated social learning model in which for any input X into the system some desirable and predictable output Y will occur. If there are problems

with the output it is not that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the system. It is merely that the system needs some adjusting and fine tuning. IQ tests and standard curves all help to underscore our belief in a version of the world which is predictable, controllable, and without any significant unresolvable contradictions. Educational change within such a view must always be conservative. And, at best, such conservative reform will provide us with more of the same in our institutions of education. And, as is clear from most of the current debates relating to educational funding, there is relatively little support for even this kind of educational change and reform.

But still, I hear these student educators lifting their voices in certain kinds of hopefulness, for some kind of a more just and compassionate world. They see themselves as educators with a kind of vision which reaches beyond current processes of educational practice and they have certain germinal understandings that educational practices are in need of radical transformation. At the same time, however, these student teachers show little interest in confronting the educational system in ways which might endanger their professional status. They have paid their dues and have made it through many of the hoops and traps of our current educational system. Their jobs as teachers are the spoils of such labor. By bucking the system, by confronting current modes of educational practice, they are well aware that they might sacrifice the fragile security for which they have fought so hard. So, while longing for certain transformational and emancipatory changes within the processes and practices of current modes of education and school life,

they are reluctant to accept the kinds of upheaval and personal and professional vulnerability which will occur in their own lives in the wake of such changes.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MORE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Although the previous chapters demonstrate some of the many obstacles involved in trying to develop a more accessible critical literacy and consciousness for school teachers in their classrooms and personal lives, this is not a reason for despair. As David Purpel urges in his work **The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education**, after recounting many of the seemingly overwhelming challenges of our time which inhibit a world of greater compassion and social justice:

We also live in a time of hope that emerges from increased consciousness and sensitivity, as well as from the achievements and potentials of our creative, artistic, scientific, and intellectual genius. We are experiencing enormously exciting and profound changes in our knowledge, theories, and paradigms in our arts, sciences, crafts, and professions. We continue to demonstrate our creative capacities to recreate the world with increasing demands for justice, joy, and meaning for all as we widen the realm of possibility.  
(Purpel, 1989, 111-112)

This proposition, that we live in a world of hope, is essential to any program designed toward an improved critical literacy or pedagogy. Cynicism, the loss of faith in human beings to create a just and meaningful world, is morally untenable. An adherence to cynicism erodes any ability we might have for the creative transformation of

our current reality and is, therefore, antithetical to any constructive critical pedagogy. We must reject cynicism.

Critical theory can be made accessible to public school teachers and their students, but not without deliberate and concerted efforts within communities of teachers to develop, expand, and open their critical literacy and thinking. It is ridiculous to speak of bringing critical theory into the classroom given the present educational climate for teaching professionals. Many public school teachers have little or no idea what critical pedagogy is in the first place. It is not uncommon for student teachers to leave their academic programs with only one or two undergraduate level courses which are grounded in critical theory or even in basic concepts of the sociology of education. Such limited foundations in critical theory, critical thinking, and critical literacy are simply not sufficient to provide teachers with the abilities to bring such work into their classroom except in the most rudimentary and trivial ways.

In addition to these problems of limited classroom experience in critical pedagogy, teachers are confronting ever more burdensome administrative, clerical, and management tasks. Teachers are snowed under with increasing obligations and requirements from state and local educational fronts while simultaneously being pressured from parental and community groups to lead students to become law-abiding citizens who will be able to pay their own way in life, instead of becoming part of a growing army of social liabilities. Although teachers have traditionally been given monumental tasks in relation to their students and their larger

communities, teachers have never before been asked to be all things to all people as much as they are today.

Furthermore, the gap between what goes on in the writing of people like Giroux, Apple, and McLaren, among others, and the everyday life of the classroom is still so great as to make critical classroom work almost impossible. And, as much as these powerful writers speak to the experiences of students in compelling and visionary ways, too little of this work is written and constructed in accessible language and form for teachers in the trenches. Too little of this theory is presented in ways that might enable front line teachers to come together to develop their own critical literacy in ways which might lead to more direct and tangible emancipatory educational practice.

In any case, how can teachers can become involved in a transformational and liberatory pedagogy if they are not actively involved in their own personal and professional liberation? How can our teachers, those who live so much of their lives in the classrooms, provide compelling reasons and examples of doing things in very different and transformed (critical) ways for and with their students if they are not finding greater community, fulfillment, power, and even joy through living a more critical life? Any critical pedagogy demands a life which consistently challenges and questions the status quo. Any such critical pedagogy is about upsetting and disrupting and undoing long accepted patterns of oppression and alienation. Such pedagogical activity is founded on conflict and change, on question and opposition, on hard reason, well-honed

vision and ongoing revolution. Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange is no easy task--it is much more a life-long journey of commitment and exploration, of inward journeying and outward activism. As teachers live such a life, students will chafe, administrators will rumble, parents will resist. And this is only the beginning. So how do we bring such pedagogy into practice?

It is apparent to me that any transformative pedagogy must somehow be connected to a politics and practice of pleasure. If activities of critical pedagogy do not bring some significant experiences of pleasure in our professional teaching lives, such pedagogical activity will most certainly fail. The implications are great, as are the challenges, for in the very first place such an affirmation, that critical pedagogical activity must somehow bring us pleasure, requires that we begin to reconceptualize pleasure and that we begin to look for and become sensitized to pleasures we have overlooked or denied before. Toward such a politics and pedagogy of pleasure I offer the following seven parameters and positions.

One, there must be a growing awareness that education as it exists today is not working. This means that we must let go of a "Let's only focus on the positive and the negative will go away by itself" attitude regarding the schools. Being positive and seeing what good there is in any practice is important. But for far too long the horrors of destructive and alienating educational practice have been allowed to continue for the sake of the few moments of success and joy that can be achieved in the current educational realm.

Two, there must be an awareness that the problems facing education today are radical, and not conservative, problems. This is to say that the problems in education go to the very heart of the way schools and educational practices have been constructed in contemporary society. Any conservative, or even liberal, reworking of the traditional school system is not going to bring about emancipatory transformation, but will only more rigidly enforce and perpetuate the current injustices which are endemic to contemporary educational school practice. The problems facing education today are embedded in the very construction of educational theory and practice and often this theory is completely hidden from the overt curriculum of schools.

Three, there must be ongoing pedagogical practices which are designed to successfully break down the institutionalized alienation and silence in schools and other public institutions. Silence and alienation must be de-institutionalized and eradicated from spaces which aspire to democratic practice. A pedagogy of pleasure is a way to meet this challenge, because within such a pedagogy we learn to enjoy our voices, as well as the voices of others, in new and challenging ways. Ultimately, people finding their own voices will never be sufficient to bring about emancipatory educational or social transformation. However insufficient our finding and raising our voices are toward a transformed world, expressing our voices is, nevertheless, an essential ingredient of community understanding and potential solidarity.

Four, the body, not the metaphorical body, but the physical bodies of people in educational settings, must be reincorporated into pedagogical practice. This means that we must begin to envision educational activities which are not so heavily dependent on our sitting in utter stillness with our activity almost exclusively relegated to our heads. I do not wish to deny the power and promise of reason in critical thinking and work: on the contrary. I am urging, however, that we bring our bodies back into relationship with the journeys of our minds. What good is the best utopian vision, if our bodies have so atrophied that we do not have a clue as to how we might begin working on, with, and in our world in material ways to bring such vision to reality? Without the body there can be no liberatory educational practice.

Five, the artificial barriers which have been constructed between disciplines and between education and the "real world" must be torn down. Ideas and their implications can no longer be compartmentalized into safe and seemingly unrelated "fields." These barriers do a great deal to distance ourselves not only from each other but also from significant parts of our selves. Such compartmentalizations can, for instance, maintain extraordinary distances between our well-developed moral and social conscience and consciousness and our daily activity in the world. Such separations can eradicate possibilities of social justice. Furthermore, by tearing down these false barriers we stand in a position to experience enormous amounts of community and pleasure as alienated spheres of our lives begin to fall together.

Six, the false assumption that any educational practice can somehow be value-neutral or apolitical must be abandoned. The moral and political qualities of education must be embraced and explored for their critical power and their transformative potential. With regard to pleasure, we must begin to live a new relationship with the moral and the political in our lives. We must learn, however uncomfortable or even painful it is at first, to make conscious political and moral thinking and discourse part of our everyday experience, both with ourselves and with others. Although a strange and foreign process, such work is inherently pleasurable precisely because such moral and political discourse speaks directly to our humanness as we are related to other people, and creates the contexts which permits us to live the contradictions of our individuality and our mutual interdependence.

Seven, there must be a deep understanding that teachers are as much in need of their students as their students are of their teachers. Connected to this is an acceptance that teachers are also on a continuing journey of development and maturity and that, furthermore, their students play an essential role in these journeys. In this way, both students and teachers are in a much improved relationship with each other to begin the quest to uncover and confront the dynamics involved in the construction of their own subjective presences in the world. Teachers can begin to confront openly their own weaknesses and vulnerability in classroom contexts, and students can begin to explore new positions of power and knowledge which have been theirs all along, but which are

generally ignored and silenced in traditional educational practice. From such a beginning students and teachers are in a much greater position to begin critically exploring the moral and political parameters of their world, and then to begin constructing visions of a more just and compassionate world toward which to work.

There is much to encourage students, teachers, parents, and administrators toward such radical and radicalizing educational work. A critical pedagogy will upset and challenge the status quo. Such a pedagogy demands that we ask of ourselves and of our students questions which have no easy answers. The questions, by the very character of critical work, will range from the broadly global to the intensely personal and psychological. Furthermore, there can be no assurances that pursuing these questions will lead to any certain or dependable answers at all. On the contrary, the most we might gain from such difficult questioning is a deeper understanding of the complexities and difficulties of the questions we ask. Perhaps this work will only lead to more questions. So be it.

If we can begin to accept such difficulties from the onset of our inquiry we might begin to live a new relation to the questions of our world. Such an acceptance might lead us to an understanding that pursuing difficult or unanswerable questions might be a more pedagogically sound activity than supporting pedagogies for which there are dependable and pre-existing answers to all questions in the curriculum. Such an appreciation and deep involvement with the questions of our world require radical activities of faith--we must have faith that the difficult, the potentially unresolvable, and the

oppositional and contradictory are the essential sources for the kinds of discourse, debate, and challenge which might bring us to a better position to begin transforming both ourselves and the institutions of our world. Such an appreciation and deep involvement with these questions may well bring us into unexpected and heretofore unimagined positions of hope and possibility.

A critical pedagogy is a messy process. Classrooms become noisy when students and teachers find their voices and decide that they will no longer submit to being silenced. The longer people have been silenced and the more rigidly such silence has been enforced, either overtly or covertly, the more noise and chaos may ensue during any processes of liberation. Furthermore, the voices that emerge may well be filled with pain, sadness, and anger. Classrooms will probably be marked by the chaos of people learning how to negotiate curriculum. Standard and set curricula provide neither the flexibility nor spirit required for a pedagogy in which the content, form, and structure of educational activity is challenged and negotiated. Furthermore, a critical classroom will never provide a safe or set moral "high ground" and, as I have explained in previous parts of this work, constructions of particular rigid moral high grounds are often dangerous and oppressing.

Order in a critical classroom will look very different from the kinds of classroom order we have come to understand as "orderly." Chaos and conflict are more apt to be the reliable parameters of order in a critical classroom challenging us to new understandings and appreciations of what it means to create a critical order within

ourselves and with each other toward a more enlivened and democratic educational community.

In a critical classroom students will not likely excel in the same ways as students do in more traditional settings. The traditional markers of academic excellence in relation to irrelevant and decontextualized subject matter will not have the same appeal to students in a more socially and personally relevant educational setting. Critically literate and sensitized students may be not at all interested in jumping through the traditional hoops currently the norm in contemporary educational settings. Student tolerance for the standard trivial pursuits in academics most likely will disintegrate. Furthermore, teachers' tolerance for forcing students through mindless and irrelevant mazes in the name of educational excellence may begin to disintegrate just as teachers' tolerance for senseless mountains of bureaucratic drudgery may vanish.

At the same time all of this is happening, the world will continue to provide the best of the good life, not the least of which are educational and professional opportunities, to the students leaving school with the highest standardized test scores and with the strongest traditional academic records. Students leaving school who are critical and challenging and are prepared and ready to become involved in a critical public sphere will likely be considered trouble makers, "non team players," and even "high risks" in professional and academic settings.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators who operate in educational systems (state or local, public or private) which define

excellence in teaching primarily in relation to test scores and numerical academic marks of their students have much to lose in the wake of improved critical literacy and critical pedagogy in their schools. And when the professional and financial advancement of teachers and administrators is based on these scores and records it will be all the more difficult for these people to encourage and embrace a critical literacy toward a more transformed and emancipatory pedagogy. Again, we must face the contradiction that in order to work within our contemporary institutions of education we must help perpetuate part of the oppression within these institutions.

And, so, our situation as teachers is difficult in the extreme. In order to achieve any work that is related to undoing the injustices and oppression of these institutions, we must get our hands dirty. We must be among the sinners and we must be prepared to make a myriad of mistakes in even our most well-intended and best thought-out work. So much of the challenge that faces us is about simply acting, about getting up in the morning to face the day and facing the day with all of its dreariness and despair. The work of a teacher is going into the classroom unsure if today is the day that a hurting child has brought the sad power of a handgun to class and is so overwhelmed by the world that the gun will be used. The work of a teacher is going into the classroom seeing the faces of children who are most surely abused in some way or another but, because of surrounding situations, little or nothing can be done to make life

more safe for these students. The list goes on, every teacher has their own. The challenge remains to somehow continue on.

The challenges before us are great: there are no simple answers and no simple solutions. And, as I have said before, although there is reason for despair, we must not despair. Humans are remarkably resilient. I am more and more amazed at what horrific experiences humans can undergo and endure and then stand with their humanity intact, and even enhanced and magnified. We do not know our own strengths and, if we can continue to believe in a better way and a better world, and if we are firm in our understanding that both injustice and justice are created by humans coming together and acting in the world, we are in a much improved situation for beginning to create a more just and compassionate world.

I hope it is clear that texts of popular culture, and specifically popular film texts, are powerful in a number of ways. These texts are rich with the contradictions and tensions we face in our everyday lives. They present these contradictions and tensions in ways that are pleasurable enough to keep our attention. Texts of popular culture are accessible to very large segments of our population: it does not take a PhD to sit through and "enjoy" a situation comedy on TV. Such popular texts are everywhere and we are more than familiar with them; indeed, such texts often invade our consciousness uninvited. Addressing texts of popular culture will be in some ways much easier than addressing other cultural forms because of this very familiarity. Furthermore, each text of popular culture contains within it a complete, if ambiguous, moral and political sphere which

we can address and explore in a number of ways. As an accessible meeting ground, these texts can provide classrooms with an abundance of critical challenge and dialogue. Within each, I believe, is some tension between hope and despair, and, finally, I believe, this is the kind of dialogue we must begin having in any critical pedagogy.

The greatest difficulties we will face using popular film texts, or any other text of popular culture, is making the space in our classrooms for such work. As I have related earlier, institutions of education despise contradictory spaces in curriculum and pedagogy. Far too few teachers have had any significant experience developing their own critical literacy and abilities. The possibility of their bringing such critical work into their classrooms is small indeed. Teachers are already overwhelmed by their daily workloads. So, what do we do? How do we maintain hope for this or any other kind of critical educational activity?

Hope is, as I have stated again and again, no simple matter in our most difficult of times. One evening a few years back I was privileged to take a meal with the critical educator Maxine Greene. I asked her, given all of the misery and despair in the world, how is it that we can hope. She looked at me and said, "Hope is in the absurd, it is in the least expected place and the unplanned moment." I first thought that this was a strange response from a woman whose work and life appear to extend from a constant hopefulness. When I look back at my own life, however, I know that the hope which has sustained me through some very difficult times and which keeps me

at this kind of work is related to the absurd and the unexpected. I know that I will never be able to do enough to change the world. I know that I am much more one of the sinners than I will ever be one of the saints. My personal despair brings me crashing into immobility and isolation from time to time. And all I know of what allows me to continue on to do the best that I can--and sometimes this is merely staying alive--is connected to the absurd. Sometimes it is the song of a bird. Sometimes it is the feel of water around my body. Sometimes it is the unexpected voice of a friend or an enemy. Such hope does not fit standard patterns of rationality and logic. It is a hope which comes, from the best of my understanding, through grace. The notion and experience of grace, as related to my own life and as related to hope toward a more active critical pedagogy and living in the world, begs further exploration. And, however problematic, grace is the pregnant and unexplained notion with which I conclude this work.

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