

THE WAR ON YOUTH: A MODERN OEDIPAL TRAGEDY

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The Janus-faced angelic/monstrous child is deeply etched onto the popular imagination. Adult attitudes towards children can be typified as ambivalent—swinging between the dual images of the threatened child and the threatening child which mirror a fear/fantasy complex and which manifest in a confused and contradictory array of imagery, ideology, and policy. Literally emblematic poster children for the Missing Children's movement allow for a public show of concern and elicit calls for child protection which bolster America's self-image as caring and child-friendly, while the public voting record shows a steady tendency to gut the very social programs that would ensure the well being of millions of (faceless) children. Positive images of childhood and youth today appear stable, in fact, only in the imaginary past. There, good kids, nostalgic simulacra of now-aging Baby Boomers, live relatively uncomplicated and safe lives in the good old days that never were; the promise of the future insured by the uncontested adult-controlled social order.

The conceptual category of "adolescence" or "youth" as a differentiated age group, one which is governed by special rules, restrictions, and protection, only fully emerged in the U.S. public imagination in the post-WWII period, when the economic and ideological requirements of peace time demanded a longer period of "immaturity," fostering more dependency, leisure, and consumerism—an about-face reversal of the practice of determining young males to be psychologically mature to satisfy the demands of war time conscription (Enright 541-59). Adolescence thus constituted the third leg of the triangulated American nuclear family—"purified of toxins [and] fully adapted to the requirements of discipline within an advanced capitalist system" (Ivy 97). Adolescence, however was an inherently volatile, fertile, and ambiguous site—the source of adult fascination and emulation as well as fear. The boundaries of adolescence were also flexible and permeable, difficult to fix and maintain.

If, in this period, we can say that adolescence represented an extension of the privileged space of childhood, with a few additional freedoms, the concept a "juvenile criminal justice system" also provided for a legal and vernacular space for "wayward" youth that sought to protect them from the adult judicial and penal systems. But the very articulation of the category of "juvenile delinquent" provided the basis for an official discourse on youth as potentially falling into the category of deviant which was threatening to the institution of the American family. Public imagery reflected a dual epistemology in which youths within the normative sphere were extended the same privilege as their younger siblings, while both children and youth outside this racially and class-segregated sphere were

consistently denied access to the protected space of childhood. Policy responses to this dual system hinged on the concept of "containment"—the increased control, management, observation, and restriction of movement of all youth—in the maintenance of the separate normative and pathological spheres.

Real-life children and youth today don't "conform to the imperatives of adults and mainstream culture," and have become "alien and sometimes hazardous in the public eye" (Giroux 13), embodiments of a racial, economic, social, and cultural future which appears threatening and foreign to many adults. In the past two decades, significant demographic shifts and economic restructuring have signalled a crisis in our collective understanding of youth—the "face" of the future is increasingly multicultural, and children, once thought of as economic assets are now seen more as liabilities or as competitors for an ever-shrinking resource pool. This paper is about the ideological response to this crisis—those mediated and narrated reconfigurations of the adult-youth relationship which can be seen as recuperative strategies which encompass all youth into the potential pathological sphere. In addition, this paper seeks to investigate the convergence of public perception, ideology, media, and politics which has emerged as a generalized and naturalized discourse on youth, and which is manifest in the educational and criminal justice systems. The paper is based on the premise that contemporary popular representations of youth are a dominant form of cultural politics which reinforce the normalization of certain adult-based violent behavior as they demonize and commoditize youth, validating the claim that those relegated to childhood and adolescence—disenfranchised minors—are consistently denied voice and power in contemporary American culture.

On April 20, 1999, two students from Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, opened fire on their school mates, killing 15 people (including themselves) and wounding 23 others. This, the deadliest school massacre in U.S. history, coming at the end of a series of similar-appearing school shootings beginning in October 1997, has been portrayed as the watershed mark for American youth. Events and policy implementation are conceptualized as being "pre-" or "post-Columbine." We are now in the post-Columbine age—a new era of "killer kids" and "zero tolerance" where a generalized "Columbine Effect" determines school policy.¹ But this kind of rhetoric suggests a causality inherent in the event itself. Rather, I would like to suggest that the event makes the story but the story conceptualizes the event (Oring). In other words, the meaning that accrues around the event is dependent on the particular representation of it. Representations of Columbine, thus, constitute the event, and the ways in which we make this event meaningful, the ways in which it is narrativized and represented,

are dependent on an already in-place communicative system, a set of culturally agreed-upon signifying practices. Additionally, the consumers of such images are implicated in the production of meaning, and this shared cultural map pre-exists in an ideological and discursive field which is hospitable to a particular representation of these school shootings.

In this ideological field, contemporary youth have been collectively demonized, with individual instances of violent behavior generalized and presented as trends or epidemics. This growing "epidemic" of juvenile lawlessness, addiction to violence, drug abuse, and general monstrosity has been presented by politicians, lawmakers, and news media, and has sedimented into public consciousness—into the stories we tell and the ways in which we order reality. These stories have helped to construct a generation of deviants through what Foucault has called a "literature of criminality," affirming that an "ever-present [juvenile] criminality is a constant menace to the social body as a whole" (Foucault 142).

- *More and more teenagers, acting individually or in gangs, are running amuck.*
- *. . . juvenile crime appears to be more widespread and vicious than ever before.*
- *Adolescents have always been violence prone, but there are horrendous crimes being committed by even younger adults.*
- *The teen crime wave flows across all races, class and lifestyles* (Toufexis 52),
- *Crime may be down, but juvenile crime is way up* (Alter 30).
- *Juvenile offenses have soared since the mid-1980s, while adult violent crime rates have remained fairly steady* (US News and World Report 29).
- *In the last three and one-half years, the crime rate is down, but the violence among young people under eighteen is up* (Males 82).

This public belief in the growing problem of violent youth, which is disproportionate to current statistical information,² and which is, furthermore, in contrast to most adults' actual experiences, should be seen as what Lawrence Grossberg calls an "affective epidemic;" a fetishized site, disconnected and disproportionate to its actual worth, ideological in intent, and fed by the "daily economy of saturated panics" (Acland 284).

Since 1997, the highly-exposed and repetitively-aired school shootings in more suburban, or rural, middle-class white schools have been conflated with the already-existing category of the inner-city gang in a perverse affirmative action which criminalizes all youth. The serialized, repetitive

presentations of this violence in the news imply that it is "routine," ubiquitous, and is occurring at younger and younger ages. Pathologizing and marginalizing such youth by means of psychological analyses and after-the-fact profiling and typologizing transforms individuals into "types," their behavior into "patterns," obscuring the common social and cultural milieu in which these events not only arise, but in which they become newsworthy, and denying the fact that violence is "jointly constructed through the interaction of agent and institution, individual and society" (Devine 3).

We need to read these moves to fix the meaning of youth as ideological, but we also need to understand the processes by which these cultural constructs have become so natural, so commonsensical in popular perception. The narratives which organize our everyday experiences are increasingly being guided by the visual logic of mass media. That is, visual pop culture regulates "conventional" meanings and social practices. Thus visual imagery, and the visual logic of commercial media which relies on shallow but repetitive impact which is "cognitively diminished but emotionally charged," provides the basis for our cognitive and narrative categories. We need to interrogate the repetitive, serialized images of school shootings, particularly of Columbine—how do these images, embedded in periodic news stories that revisit the sites, tend to attenuate affective response while they build consensus through volume, through constant repetition? The naturalization of such ideological and cultural constructions of youth tend to carry over into policy when the organization of reality that is increasingly structured according to a mediated logic carries over into other areas of public life, notably the educational and criminal justice systems.

The representation and popular perception of children and youth as "out of control" and antagonistic toward, if not dangerous to, adults and adult privilege is politically potent, and has spawned a host of mean-spirited, ideologically conservative, racist and ageist policies and pedagogies that are far ranging in scope, but singular in purpose—the repression and restriction of youth. The public perception that youth generally constitute a threat to society has resulted in predictable "solutions" that are increasingly punitive,³ and which call for greater restrictions and surveillance of all kids, such as the imposition of curfews and the use of metal detectors and surveillance cameras in schools, the early identification of "problem kids," and their subsequent institutionalized removal from the social sphere, either through the use of psychotropic drugs or through incarceration—"zero tolerance no nonsense tough love." The latest of these "solutions" is California's Proposition 21.

On March 7, 2000, Californians voted 62% to 38% in favor of Proposition 21, known as the "Youth Crime Initiative," or "Gang Violence and Juvenile Crime Prevention Act," but perceptively dubbed the "War On Youth" by its opponents, most of whom were under-age teens of color. Riding the crest of the public panic about "killer kids" that was spectacularly brought to prominence by school shootings such as Columbine, this redundant, punitive initiative targets youth—particularly loosely-defined "gangs" lowering the age at which youths accused of serious offenses would automatically be tried and sentenced as adults to 14,⁴ and the age at which they could be incarcerated in adult prisons to 16, while it stiffens many of the penalties for crimes committed by gang members, although the definition of "gang" is nefariously vague and racist in implementation. Prop 21 effectively rolls back a 100-year-old juvenile criminal justice code that sought to protect and rehabilitate children and youths more than it sought punishment or retribution, and more generally follows a growing California tendency of building prisons while gutting the educational system, so that today there are more youths in the penal system than there are attending the University of California. The rhetoric surrounding the initiative is generally presented in terms of "us versus them," those with power versus those without, and adults against youth. Former California Governor, Pete Wilson, who sponsored Prop 21, spoke to voters' visceral fears of "kids gone bad," and framed the initiative in clearly generational (and false) terms, saying: "While adult crime has been falling dramatically, the same cannot be said for youth violence and gang violence" (Ellis B4).

Prop 21, and its run-away support by voters, is the latest in a series of measures that are fed by special interests and by fear mongering, but that also gain strength and credibility, in part, by tapping into a pre-existing cultural landscape of sedimented folklore, belief, and popularized psychology which aggregate around the intergenerational strife narrative—Oedipus. The Oedipal complex was primary to Freud and his "family romance," and Freud, and a vernacularized Freudian psychology, has been thoroughly imbricated into popular American consciousness in the second half of the 20th century. Accordingly, Oedipus has become, according to Marina Warner, a "dominant tale in our time" (Warner 68). The privileging of this tale, and the subsequent silencing of others that place more emphasis on murderous, cannibalistic, and rapacious fathers, and the dominance of the Freudian reading of the Oedipal tale itself, which obscures the original crime of Oedipus's father Laius, is a master plot of the late 19th and 20th century, and is echoed in contemporary "get tough" policies toward youth.

We have to reintegrate this master plot of the symbolic imagination into the cultural and ideological context out of which it emerged. The

Oedipal complex as a by-now naturalized psychoanalytic construct is historically situated within the discourses of modern capitalism, and in this sense, the Oedipus complex is the "figurehead of imperialism" (Foucault xx), one of the most persuasive agents in the modern micro-physics of power. Seen in this light, we can begin to divest the Oedipus tale of its individualistic family romance status and read it as a metaphor for society. Freudians and folklorists alike become complicit in their unquestioned reaffirmation of the patriarchal privilege in their embrace of this tale and its normalizing interpretation which are reinscribed in the legal, social, and political complex that emerged in the early modern period which naturalized paternal authority, infantilized citizenship, and bifurcated the concept of the child, who could be either incorporated or incarcerated in the maintenance of patriarchal privilege. Today's rhetoric in support of measures such as Prop 21 seemingly upholds such a Freudian Oedipal logic and is also putatively defensive: protecting us from "the most violent juvenile criminals and gang offenders" (California Voter 48), justifying the escalation of draconian measures directed against youth.

The classic Oedipus begins with a prophecy, as do contemporary narratives which flow from our oracle, the media, and from our prophets, the "experts." According to *Time's* cover article on "Teen Age Time Bombs,"

They are just four, five and six years old right now, but already they are making criminologists nervous [. . .]. By the year 2005 they will be teenagers—[. . .] "temporary sociopaths—impulsive and immature," in the words of Northeastern U. criminologist James Alan Fox. (Zoglin)

Similarly, under the headline "The Coming Mayhem," *LA Times* editor Richard Rodriguez echoes Oedipus's banishment in his demands to incarcerate contemporary youth:

. . . a growing population of teenage boys will mean an increase in murders, rapes, and muggings. A new type of criminal is emerging. . . Remorseless, vacant-eyed, sullen-and very young. . . We are entering a Stephen King novel. We are entering an America where adults are afraid of children. Where children rule the streets. Where adults cower at the approaching tiny figure on the sidewalk ahead," (Rodriguez 36)

Vladimir Propp's observation that the Oedipal "Prophecy does not determine the outcome; rather the outcome determines the prophecy" (Propp 83) perhaps illuminates a paternal animus that is occulted in the dominant Freudian Oedipal interpretation. The naturalized status of the Oedipal complex in modern discourses has, in fact, reaffirmed this animus

by only focusing on some aspects of the Oedipal plot and rejecting or ignoring others. This is the tyranny of Oedipus in which analysis is prior to data. The current focus on a generation of killer kids likewise tends to ignore obvious contemporary statistics to the contrary: not only are many more adults killed by other adults than by children each year, but more children are killed by adults than adults by children and youth in any given time period—including the 2,000 to 3,000 children and youths reported murdered by their own parents every year (Males 99). Couple this with staggering figures of child poverty, neglect, and abuse, along with the systematic abandonment of children in both the social and educational systems, and the case for paternal animus becomes fairly persuasive. Clearly there is a generational tragedy, but its story is just as clearly topsy-turvy.

The stories we tell and the narrative paradigms we use to construct them both derive and shape perceptions about our relationships as human beings, and "reality" is constituted and acted upon according to such conceptual and narrative models. Contemporary representations simultaneously project youth as the object of adult violence and rage, the object of adult moralistic anti-violence campaigns (violently implemented), and the object of adult desires. In our contemporary narratives about collective fears of monstrous youth, and the affective crisis that these narratives have engendered, what we can see are the *machinations of hegemony* (Acland 19), in a recuperative narrative strategy. Like the Family Romance, "Family Values," that thin smokescreen for a conservative economic drive in which "capital has taken upon itself the relations of alliance and filiation (Deleuze and Guattari 263)," is more appropriately seen as an adult fantasy which has "exonerated the real exterior family of any wrongs.

. .[by] posit[ing] autonomous repression [as] independent of social repression. . ." Abandoning the child in order to "substitute the individual fantasy that makes the real parents into so many innocents or even victims (Deleuze and Guattari 270)."

NOTES

1. See for example: "The Columbine Effect: 'Zero Tolerance' Sounds like a Good Way to Treat Violence in our Schools. But Does it Go too Far?" *Time* v154, n23 (Dec 6, 1999):51+.

2. In an article in the San Francisco Chronicle dated Oct. 18, 1999, entitled "Arrests for Juvenile Crimes Drop Across Nation," (A2), FBI "figures" are reported to indicate that "juvenile arrests for serious and violent crimes fell nearly 11 percent from 1997 to 1998."

3. For example the "Juvenile Superpredator Incapacitation Act," which passed in the House of Representatives on May 8, 1997. by a vote of 286 to 132 and which was supported by President Clinton. Rep. Bill McCollum (R) Florida sponsored the punitive bill by stating, ". . . there's so many new and increasing and alarming numbers on violent crime among teenagers. . . We need to provide a change, a repair in a broken juvenile justice system in this nation we have one out of every five violent crimes in America being committed by those under 18 years of age..." [not mentioning that 4 out of 5 are therefore over 18, but are not also a superpredator age group].

4. In California, prior to Prop 21, it was legally possible to try a 14-year-old as an adult, but on a judge's recommendation, whereas after Prop. 21 this is at the recommendation of prosecutors.

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