

Critical Pedagogy, Cultural Studies, and Radical Democracy at the Turn of the Millennium: Reflections on the Work of Henry Giroux

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After publishing a series of books that many recognize as major works on contemporary education and critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux turned to cultural studies in the late 1980s to enrich education with expanded conceptions of pedagogy and literacy.¹ This cultural turn is animated by the hope to reconstruct schooling with critical perspectives that can help us to better understand and transform contemporary culture and society in the contemporary era. Giroux provides cultural studies with a critical pedagogy missing in many versions and a sustained attempt to link critical pedagogy and cultural studies with developing a more democratic culture and citizenry. The result is an intersection of critical pedagogy and cultural studies that enhances both enterprises, providing a much-needed cultural and transformative political dimension to critical pedagogy and a pedagogical dimension to cultural studies.

Crucially, Giroux has linked his attempts to transform pedagogy and education with the project of promoting radical democracy. Giroux's earlier work during the 1970s and 1980s focused on educational reform, pedagogy, and the transformation of education to promote radical democracy. In *Border Crossings* (1992), Giroux notes "a shift in both my politics and my theoretical work" (1). The shift included incorporation of new theoretical discourses of poststructuralism and postmodernism, cultural studies, and the politics of identity and difference embodied in the new discourses of class, gender, race, and sexuality that proliferated in the post-1960s epoch. Giroux criticized those who ignore "the sea changes in social theory" within the field of education and called for a transformation of education and pedagogy in the light of the new paradigms, discourses, and practices that were circulating by the 1990s.

One of the key new discourses and practices that Giroux was henceforth to take up and develop involved the burgeoning discipline of cultural studies. In his initial appropriations of cultural studies, he presented his shift as a "border crossing" that involved transformative transdisciplinary perspectives which overcame the disciplinary abstractions and separations of fields like education, social theory, and literary studies. In metatheoretical discussions, Giroux presented reasons for the importance of cultural studies in reconstructing contemporary education, the need for new understandings of culture, cultural politics, and pedagogy that went beyond the orthodoxy of both Left and Right, focusing on how the transformation of education and pedagogy could contribute to the project of radical democracy. Giroux thus uses cultural studies to transform and enrich critical pedagogy and to provide new intellectual tools and practices to transform education. In turn, he argues that cultural studies needs to see the importance of pedagogy and to continue its commitment to radical democratic social transformation, rather than to merely indulge in textualist readings or audience studies of how people use and enjoy popular culture, as in some versions of cultural studies that have emerged in the past decade.

For over a decade now, Giroux has accordingly focused on developing the relationship between critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and radical democracy in a series of books, including *Border Crossings* (1992), *Living Dangerously: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Culture*

(1993), *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture* (1994), *Fugitive Cultures* (1996), *Channel Surfing: Racism, the Media, and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (1997), *The Mouse that Roared: What Disney Teaches* (1999), *Stealing Innocence* (2000), and *Impure Acts. The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies* (2000).² This rich and productive corpus crisscrosses the borderlines of educational theory and pedagogy, cultural studies, social theory, and radical democratic politics, promoting a genuinely transdisciplinary and transformative reconstruction of education, theory, society, and politics.

My study will accordingly engage Giroux's writing in these arenas over the past decade, highlighting what I see as the most significant contributions to transforming education and society, as well as some limitations of his work. At stake is developing a critical pedagogy and cultural studies that will help empower the next generation and enliven democracy as we enter a situation perilous to democracy and the individual in the new millennium.

Giroux's Big Themes: Youth as Hope and Scapegoat

Giroux's work is important because it takes on many of the "big" issues of the contemporary era. Several of his recent books have focused on the social construction and media representations of youth, in explorations of how youth have been both scapegoated for social problems and commodified and exploited by the advertising, consumer, and media industries. Giroux always situates his cultural analyses within a political and historical context so that, for instance, the war against youth is seen as part of an attack on the welfare state, public schooling, and democratic culture during the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years. Giroux also takes care to contextualize his writings within his own working class background, his history as a critical educator, and emergence as a radical critic of existing culture, society, politics, and the educational establishment. Giroux combines the personal and the political, the theoretical and the practical, in taking on the key issues of the day.

In the light of the ongoing attack on youth and youth culture in the contemporary postColumbine conjuncture, it is interesting to read in Giroux's 1996 *Fugitive Cultures* analyses of how media were then scapegoating youth, especially youth of color, as the source of social problems and the escalation of violence in society. Giroux cites the disturbing statistic that "close to 12 U.S. children aged 19 and under die from gun fire each day. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 'Firearm homicide is the leading cause of death of African-American teenage boys and the second-leading cause of death of high school age children in the United States'" (cited in Giroux 1996: 28).

Giroux correctly notes that the proliferating media stories about youth and violence at the time generally avoid critical commentary on the connections between the escalation of violence in society and the role of poverty and social conditions in promoting violence -- a blindspot that continues into the present. In addition, he astutely notes that the media scapegoating of youth also neglect dissection of the roles of white men in generating violence and destruction, such as "the gruesome toll of the drunk driver who is typically white" (1996: 37).

At the same time, working class youth and youth of color are being represented in the media and conservative discourses as predators, as threats to existing law, order, and morality. Most disturbingly, at the very time that poverty and division between the haves and the have nots are growing, a conservative-dominated neo-liberal polity is cutting back the very programs -- public education, job training and programs, food stamps, health and welfare support -- that

provide the sustenance to create opportunities and hope for youth at risk. Giroux correctly rejects the family values and moralistic critique of media culture of such conservatives who lead the assault on the state and welfare programs while supporting prisons, harsher punishment, and a "zero tolerance" for youthful transgressions (Giroux, forthcoming).

Instead, Giroux targets the corporations who circulate problematic images of youth and the rightwing social forces that scapegoat youth for social programs at the same time they attack programs and institutions that might actually help youth. Giroux is clearly aware of media culture as pedagogy and calls upon cultural critics to see the pedagogical and political functions of such cultural forms that position youth as objects of fear or desire. In a series of studies, Giroux notes how corporations exploit the bodies of youth to sell products, manufacturing desires for certain products, and constructing youth as consumers.

In a brilliant critique of a series of Benetton fashion ads, Giroux argues that the 1985 United Colors of Benetton campaign used images of racial harmony to sell both its clothing line and a banal view of cultural unity that erased class, racial, gender, and sexual difference, inequalities, oppression, and suffering (1994: 3ff). In his sharp critique of the 1991 Benetton campaign which included compelling images of a person with AIDS, poverty, war, and environmental destruction, Giroux argues that the purported social realism of these ads was used to aestheticize suffering and to sell an image of the Benetton corporation as a vehicle of social responsibility. Giroux deconstructs the campaign by disclosing the corporations' commitment to neo-liberal anti-government positions, hostility to unions, and its attempt to position its fashion-line within a global clothing market. Carrying out a detailed analysis of the production and reception of the Benetton campaign, Giroux dissects how a major global corporation uses images as vehicles of ideology and promotion of its wares. His studies demonstrate the need for a visual pedagogy which engages the production and reception of corporate images, as well as providing a hermeneutical reading of the specific images and texts.

Giroux continued his pedagogy of the corporate image and advertising in a critique of 1995 Calvin Klein ads. This advertising campaign deployed photos of youthful bodies by Perry Meisel, posed in provocative sexual displays bordering on the pornographic, to sell high-end clothing (1997, Chapter One). The ironic use of underclass youth to sell expensive clothes underlines what Giroux sees as the dual process of scapegoating youth while objectifying and commodifying them to sell products. Young bodies are positioned in such images not as sources of agency or resistance, but as a "site of spectacle and objectification, where youthful allure and sexual titillation are marketed and consumed by teens and adults who want to indulge a stylized narcissism and coddle a self that is all surface" (1997: 21).

Giroux also critically interrogates a Calvin Klein "heroin chic" campaign that portrayed emaciated bodies and covertly romanticized drug use and youth decadence (1999: Chapter Two), thus falling in line with conservative attacks on youth as decadent and immoral. His intention, however, is not to engage in a moralistic critique of such ads. Rather, Giroux undertakes to show how they merge fashion and art to shape images of the youthful body in the interests of commodification that serve corporate profits while providing highly problematic role models and forms of identity for youth. Giroux is concerned that youth are being increasingly driven from the public sphere, active democratic citizenship, and empowering creativity into privatized spaces where they are positioned as consumers and provided with identities that replicate commodified

models and ideals.

Channel Surfing (1997) and his more recent *Stealing Innocence* (2000) provide examples of critical pedagogy that demonstrate that "childhood" and "youth" are social constructions and sites of struggle between opposing political ideologies and forces. "Children" and "youth" in Giroux's view are a complex site of hope and possibility, as well as domination and exploitation. Giroux critically engages the pedagogies in locales ranging from schooling to media culture and everyday life that shape youth. In particular, he provides sustained critique of representations that scapegoat youth for public problems at the same time that the political and media establishment carry out attacks on public schools and programs and policies which provide opportunities and hope for youth. Giroux criticizes representations of youth such as are found in Calvin Klein ads, depictions of irresponsible sex and drug use in films like *Larry Clark's Kids* (1996), and a variety of urban films that especially vilify youth of color and help foster public images of youth as decadent, corrupt, and in need of discipline and control.

Against the scapegoating and commercialization of youth, and the promotion of attitudes of despair and hopelessness, Giroux wants to foster an ethic of hope and possibility, conceptualizing youth as a contested terrain, as an arena both of oppression and struggle. Giroux argues that by criticizing misrepresentations of youth in media culture and the scapegoating of youth through negative media images and discourses, we are combatting an attack on youth used to justify cutbacks in education, harsher criminal penalties and other punitive measures that are arguably part of the problem rather than the solution.³

Giroux sees culture and the media as forms of pedagogy, every bit as important -- and in some cases more so -- than schooling. He calls for a cultural studies that provides a counterpedagogy to the teaching that is provided by mainstream schooling and corporate and media culture, noting: "For years, I believed that pedagogy was a discipline developed around the narrow imperatives of public schooling" (1994: x). And yet, he notes that his own identity was largely fashioned on the terrain of popular culture and everyday life that shaped him more significantly than public education. Accordingly, he argues that pedagogy needs to be theorized in terms of a variety of public sites that shape, mold, socialize, and educate individuals. Indeed, Giroux convincingly demonstrates in book after book that it is precisely corporate media culture that is shaping our culture and everyday life, as well as institutions such as schooling and cultural sites like museums, theme parks, shopping centers, and the like.

For Giroux, "the politics of culture provide the conceptual space in which childhood is constructed, experienced, and struggled over" (2000a: 4). Culture is both the sphere in which adults exercise control over children and a site where children and youth can resist the adult world and create their own cultures and identities. It is thus important to critically question "the specific cultural formations and contexts in which childhood is organized, learned, and lived" (1994: x).

In a study of child beauty pageants (2000a, Chapter 1), Giroux shows how this competitive sphere imposes adults models on children, promotes restricted and problematic gender roles, and displays provocative sexual displays in young girls. Giroux does not, a la Neil Postman, lament the "adultifying" of the child and disappearance of childhood (pp. 12ff and 40), but focuses on the exploitation of children in these "nymphet fantasies" in which adults project their desires and impose their models upon girls. Giroux's concern is with how children and youth

are exploited and socialized by commercial consumer culture and the lack of public spaces and sites for the young to develop agency and learn democratic and cooperative social relations and values in an increasingly commodified and privatized culture and society.

Giroux's analysis of the genealogy of child beauty pageants calls attention to often neglected source of childhood construction that need to be engaged by a critical cultural pedagogy. As an example of corporate pedagogy, Giroux devotes sustained study of the multiple roles in childhood socialization, ideological indoctrination, and commercialization of the Walt Disney corporation, resulting in a book on Disney and its pedagogies (1999). Giroux's first study of "the Wonderful World of Disney" cultural production, a slogan that he suggests itself stands as a metonym for the United States, analyzes certain Disney Touchstone films, targeted mainly at teenagers and adults.

Hollywood Pedagogy

Giroux notes how the terrain of Hollywood film provides an important ground of pedagogy and takes on the politics of representation in two Disney Touchstone films of the era, *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) and *Pretty Woman* (1990). Giroux presents Barry Levinson's take on Vietnam as an attempt to recuperate the sense of U.S. loss over the Vietnam war, to establish an ethos of innocence for American memory, and to erase from history the turbulence and violence of the Vietnam era. The suffering and tragedy of Vietnam is displaced by Robin Williams' "comic, manic improvisation" (1994: 35). Williams plays a DJ for an Army radio station in Saigon circa 1965. Conflict focused on involves what sort of music the DJ could play, and Giroux suggests that cultural struggle over music replaces the dynamic of contestation over the war itself, while the U.S. intervention is clothed in innocence, presenting U.S. soldiers as tourists to an exotic locale.

Giroux also criticizes the racism and sexism in the film, as in the representations of the black side-kick to the DJ, played by Forest Whitaker, who is presented as "a shuffling, clumsy grunt" and is positioned as the obedient servant to the colonial master. Not surprisingly, the representations of the Vietnamese are racist, with women displayed as sexual commodities for U.S. servicemen, while in general the Vietnamese are present as exotic Others who are purveyors of criminality and lawlessness.

Pretty Woman, in Giroux's reading, also presents ideological representations of recent U.S. history, this time in the Cinderella story of a working class prostitute, played by Julia Roberts, who is groomed and redeemed by a corporate raider (Richard Gere). Assimilating appropriate fashion and style imagery, in the Disney redoing of the Pygmalion myth, the prostitute reconstitutes herself as an suitable corporate trophy wife, and patriarchal relations and family values thus triumph over sordid and inappropriate sex and style. The predatory business practices of the corporate raider are erased in the chivalrous behavior of the businessman, whose questionable business practices are justified when he takes over his father's corporation, who had mistreated him and his mother.

The Disney world of innocence and family values is thus able to triumph and redeem even disturbing and base historical and social conditions. Giroux's second sustained critique of Disney ideology involved critical scrutiny of Disney animation cartoons aimed at children (1996: Chapter 3 and its continuation in 1999). He notes that while cultural studies has traditionally focused on youth culture, it has largely ignored children's culture, such as animated films (1996: 89-90).

Giroux scrutinizes the narrow gender roles in these films and finds that although some of the young women portrayed, such as the woman-mermaid Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) or the young woman in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), are initially depicted as feisty and active, they are positioned to find true love and happiness in submission to male-dominated romance. Other Disney films like *Aladdin* (1992) simply portray women as handmaidens to male pleasure, or like *The Lion King* (1994) are strictly patriarchal, depicting women in subordinate roles.

Giroux dissects as well the stereotyping and covert racism in recent Disney animation films. Arabs are depicted in vile racist representations and many of the villains in Disney animation "speak through racially coded language and accents" (106). The heroes and heroines in these films, however, speak standardized American and are portrayed in images modelled after idealized American youth. A Disney cultural worker, for instance, admitted that the figure of Aladdin was modelled after Tom Cruise (106), and, as Giroux suggests, heroines such as the little Mermaid or Pocahontas are modelled after Southern California nubile teen models. Such representations normalize whiteness and American fashion and style as the ideal for youth, fostering insecurities and feelings of inferiority in youth of color or other nationalities.

In addition, and notoriously, Disney films erase the scars and ugliness of colonial history, as in *Pocahontas* (1995) which shows no trace of the displacement, suffering, and death inflicted indigenous peoples by the European colonists. Moreover, Disney films like *The Lion King* display "deeply antidemocratic social relations" (107), naturalizing authority, hierarchy, structural inequality, and royalty as part of a natural order. Class, gender, and racial inequalities are presented as benign and justified in this world, displaying Disney nostalgia for a simpler and more harmonious world that erases from cultural memory the turbulence and pain of history and the continuation of social inequalities, injustice, and suffering in the present.

Giroux thus critically dissects the sorts of pedagogy involved in the Disney world. He analyzes "what Disney teaches," the implications of a big corporate conglomerate playing such a major role in pedagogy and socialization, and the ways that this influences education, politics, and our cultural and public life, here in the U.S. and globally. Giroux's book on Disney includes dissection of the structure and power of the Disney corporation, and raises questions about the effects of the possession of so much cultural power. Demonstrating the immense range of cultural sites occupied by the Disney corporation, Giroux discloses the diversity of its products in critical analyses of Disney's films, its forays into education and community building, and its extensive marketing operations of toys and merchandise spun-off from its films. Critically engaging such a cultural empire requires combining historical, social and political analysis, textual readings, and studies of cultural effects of a wide range of artifacts. Giroux thus produces a cultural studies which deploys transdisciplinary perspectives, including analysis of political economy and production, cultural artifacts and sites, and their reception and effects.

Giroux thus offers a wide-ranging model of cultural studies and greatly expands the domain of pedagogy, demonstrating the importance of critically engaging the pedagogy of a broad spectrum of cultural artifacts, often ignored by educators. Since youth today are the subjects of education, critical teachers must understand youth, their problems and prospects, hopes and fears, competencies and limitations. Understanding and productively engaging youth in the context of their everyday lives is clearly one of the big issues for educators, parents, citizens, and those of us concerned about the future. For youth are the future, and the quality of life and the

polity of the new millennium depend on educating youth and helping produce generations who can themselves create a better, freer, happier, and more just society. Hence, Giroux constantly argues that educators, parents, and citizens should be deeply concerned with youth. This involves attempting to understand its culture and problems, combating the ways that youth are being misrepresented in the media and miseducated in the schools, and developing pedagogical strategies and cultural politics that will reform and democratically transform media, education, and society.

Cultural studies is useful here because it provides access to youth culture, to the actual culture that socializes and educates youth -- or in some cases miseducates it --, and thus potentially increases our understanding of the youth we are teaching and working with. Clearly, Giroux demonstrates the importance of media education for a reconstruction of schooling and the importance of cultural studies for a transformative critical pedagogy. He also consistently argues that key social phenomena such as the situation of youth can only be grasped through their race, gender, and class configurations, that youth are articulated by these concrete social determinants which must be addressed in any adequate analysis.

The Intersection of Class, Race, and Gender

For Giroux, culture matters precisely because such constituents of everyday experience as youth, gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on are constructed in and through cultural representations. Often, these representations are invisible and their effects are unperceived. Hence, a critical cultural studies must make visible how representations construct a culture's normative views of such things as class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, place, occupation, and the like, and how these representations are appropriated to produce subjectivities, identities, and practices.

Some of Giroux's first concrete cultural studies of the 1990s involve analysis and critique of how Hollywood celluloid culture constructs a pedagogy of class, race, and gender. He indicates the need for critical media pedagogy to disclose how these texts are constructed and to help enable students to critically dissect and interpret media representations, narratives, and their effects. In a reading of *Dead Poets Society* (1993: 40ff.), Giroux tells how his students initially identified with the rebellious teacher Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams. Keating set out to reinvigorate education at a conservative boys boarding school, Welton Academy, which functioned to prepare elite males for Ivy League colleges and ruling class life. At first, Giroux notes, students saw the Williams' figure as an ideal of transformative education, passionately committed to teaching, and helping to change his students life in an emancipatory fashion.

But a closer reading of the film, Giroux remarks, discloses a "politics and aesthetics of nostalgia" which looks back to past cultural forms (e.g. romantic poetry) as privileged cultural texts, thus in effect affirming a conservative canon as the heart and soul of pedagogy. Thus, while the film does provide a critique of authoritarian and disciplinary education, it does not go beyond conservative individualism and aestheticism and fails to engage the problems, conflicts, and struggles of the present, to see the past as a contested terrain, or to engage those voices and texts that more radically contest the inequities and injustices of Western civilization. Moreover, when Keating himself is challenged by the authorities for his unorthodox teaching practices and unjustly dismissed over the suicide of a student, he politely and respectfully submits to his fate, rather than exhibiting any critique, resistance, or struggle against the repressive and authoritarian

power structure that rules the institution.

Furthermore, Giroux criticizes the representations of women in the film "that are misogynist and demeaning" (1993: 47). Women are positioned primarily to support and provide pleasure to men, they are relegated "to either trophies or appendages of male power" (48). Women are not presented in the film as active subjects with their own dreams and agency, but as "reified object[s] of [male] desire and pleasure" (48).

Of course, race is invisible in *Dead Poets Society* which "privileges whiteness, patriarchy, and heterosexuality as the universalizing norms of identity" (42). The film takes for granted the equation of whiteness with class privilege and does not trouble its nostalgic narrative with the disruptive dynamics of race and sexuality. Likewise, in another probing cultural study of the period, Giroux shows how the contemporary conflicts over gender, race, and class are ideologically smoothed and absorbed in the narrative machine of *Grand Canyon* (1993: 104ff). In this film, the white yuppie family of the story come to recognize racial and cultural difference in the present, but in a manner that reassures them that they do not have to surrender power and privilege and that difference can be harmoniously absorbed into the existing order.

Indeed, Giroux has intensely engaged over the past decade the problematics and dynamics of race --, clearly one of the major issues of our time, -- as well as the intersections of race, class, gender, multiculturalism, and the crisis of democracy and public schooling in the U.S. (see especially Giroux 1993, 1996, and 1997). He enriches these topics with his combination of critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and a sustained political situating of representations and struggles over race within the context of burning issues and conflicts of the day.

In discussing issues of violence in the media and the effects of media violence on youth and society, Giroux argues that discussions of violence and media must include race and class (1997, Preface and passim). In a series of texts, he has carried out sustained critiques of media stigmatizing of youth as the source of social ills through analysis of depictions of violent youth in the media and journalism, cinematic representations of youth in Hollywood film, and political discourses that call for "zero tolerance" of youth indiscretions and crimes (forthcoming).

In particular, Giroux shows how media representations of blacks stigmatize youth and, more broadly, people of color. In *Fugitive Cultures* (1996), Giroux documents the role of media presentations of blacks which have helped promote what he calls "a white moral panic" (1996: 97). During the era of the O.J. Simpson trials in the mid-1990s, major magazines featured threatening black males on their covers with stories like "A Predator's Struggle to Tame Himself" and "The Black Man Is in Terrible Trouble. Whose Problem is That?" (ibid). Giroux points out that the endless repetition of these images "reproduce racist stereotypes about blacks by portraying them as criminals and welfare cheats"; it also "remove whites from any responsibility or complicity for the violence and poverty that has become so endemic to American life" (1996: 66).

Racial coding of violence and the association of crime with youth of color was evident in the attacks on rap music and hip hop culture that circulated throughout the 1990s.⁴ As an example, Giroux cites the hypocrisy of Bob Dole's attack on rap and Hollywood films' depiction of violence, drugs, and urban terror. For Dole refused to criticize violence in the films of the Hollywood right, such as those of Republicans Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Moreover, he was a fervent supporter of the NRA and critic of stricter gun laws, and failed to

address the ways that poverty and worsening social conditions generated violence (produced in part by Republican policies that Dole spearheaded). Moreover, Dole had often not even seen the films nor heard the music attacked (1996: 67ff).

Always clearly pointing to the political consequences of such cultural and political discourses and representations, Giroux notes that "such racist stereotyping produce more than prejudice and fear in the white collective sensibility. Racist representations of violence also feed the increasing public outcry for tougher crime bills designed to build more prisons and legislate get-tough policies with minorities of color and class" (1996: 67). Hence, racist and brutal depictions of people of color in media culture contribute to intensification of the culture of violence, and fuel campaigns by rightwing organizations that stigmatize racial groups. Such representations also promote social and political conditions that aggravate rather than ameliorate problems of crime, urban decay, and violence.

Indeed, throughout the 1990s and continuing into the new millennium there have been copious media spectacles featuring dangerous blacks, including sustained attacks on rap music and hip hop culture, black gangs and crime, and urban violence in communities of color. Latinos are also stigmatized with political (mis)measures such as Proposition 187 "which assigns increasing crime, welfare abuse, moral decay, and social disorder to the flood of Mexican immigrants streaming across the borders of the United States" (Giroux 1996: 66). Social scientists contribute to the stigmatization in books like *The Bell Curve* which assert black inferiority and provide "a respectable intellectual position" for racist discourse in the national debate on race (1996: 67).

Hollywood films and entertainment media contribute as well to negative national depictions of people of color. In his discussion of Hollywood cinematic portrayals of inner city youth, Giroux analyzes how communities of color are shown as disruptive forces in public schools, contributing to white moral panic that youth of color are predatory, violent, and are destroying the moral and social fabric of the country. Films like *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Clockers* (1995) present negative representations of black youth which Giroux argues feed into rightwing moral panics and help mobilize support for harsher policing and incarceration of ghetto youth. Against these prejudicial and sensationalistic fictional representations, Giroux valorizes Jonathan Stack's documentary *Harlem Diary* (1996) in which urban youth are themselves provided with cameras and cinematic education to explore their situations and to give voice to their own fears and aspirations (1997: 62).

In addressing the culture of violence in *Fugitive Cultures* (1996), Giroux engages what he calls "hyper-real" violence in the films of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Giroux argues that Tarantino's use of excessive and exaggerated violence in these films aestheticizes the brutality of violence, contributing to a cynical and nihilistic cinema. *Reservoir Dogs* uses a gritty realism and stylized violence to represent extremely ruthless crime in ways that "revels in stylistic excess in order to push the aesthetic of violence to its visual and emotional limits" (1996: 71).

Pulp Fiction, in Giroux's reading, promotes the same cynical ethos of Tarantino's earlier film, but in the register of a more hip, cool, and stylized postmodern idiom. Pasticheing the crime genre of "pulp fiction," Tarantino fragments his narrative structure, deploys a sadistic irony and ultra hip talk and music, and puts on display a misanthropic amorality to promote what Ruth

Conniff has called "a culture of cruelty" (1996: 76). Tarantino, in Giroux's reading, deploys violence for shock and schlock effects, playing with cinematic conventions, without critically analyzing, contextualizing, or contesting the patterns of violence in his films. Violence in Tarantino's films is gratuitous, contingent, and ubiquitous, rather than emerging from specific contexts and social conditions. It can erupt anywhere, anytime, to anyone, rather than being generated by specific social causes and conditions. It is aestheticized and used for shock effects rather than to probe into what causes violence and its horrific effects on human beings and communities. Such films thus contribute to promoting a culture of brutality by naturalizing and romanticizing major forces of human suffering and tragedy.

Giroux also critiques the racism and sexism in Tarantino's film, noting the racist language and obsessive use of the "N-word," as well as the highly problematic representations of women and homophobia. Indeed, Giroux suggests that the rape of a black by two white thugs in *Pulp Fiction* combines homophobia with racism (82), presenting at once highly derogatory images of gay sex and positioning the black man as a deserving target of white male rage (he is about to kill the Bruce Willis character for honorably refusing to throw a fight, as the black thug ordered). Giroux also points out how the sociopath Jules (played by Samuel Jackson) misuses the African-American tradition of prophetic language in his pretentious use of religious discourse in the context of committing heinous crimes (82).

Giroux insists that such cinematic transgression and irony is not innocent or merely playful, but has harmful political and cultural effects. Yet Giroux does not himself stigmatize Hollywood films or the media for the alarming escalation of violence in the U.S., calling attention instead to conditions of poverty, social injustice, and urban decline that contribute to the larger problems of the contemporary era. Attacking Bob Dole's and other hypocritical assaults on Hollywood and the media, Giroux argues that it is precisely conservative policies which cut back public institutions that would provide adequate education, welfare, employment, public spaces, and life opportunities for youth that helped generate the alienation, violence, and nihilism that is all too evident in contemporary American life -- and not only in communities of color, as we are aware in the post-Columbine epoch.

Hence, a critical cultural studies and pedagogy should at once carry out critical discussion of the politics of representation in media culture, focusing on the images and discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality, but at the same time contextualize the critique within broader social conditions, discourses, and struggles. While ethical and ideological critique of specific forms and texts of media culture are certainly appropriate, the critical pedagogue avoids moralizing assaults on media culture per se. The focus is instead on how racism, sexism, poverty, political discourses and policies, and the social context as a whole produce phenomena like violence and suffering. Although media culture can be contributory, it is not the origin of human suffering, and thus censoring media images is not the solution to problems like societal violence and injustice. Rather there are a complex nexus of conditions that cause violence and youth nihilism, and while media culture can be criticized for its representations it should not be scapegoated.

The political contextualization, critique, and focus of Giroux's work, however, sometimes lead his exercises in cultural studies and critical pedagogy to what might be called a political and ideological overdetermination of his readings of specific cultural texts. While Giroux increasingly focuses on the importance of cultivating the ethical dimensions of education and critical

pedagogy, his readings of specific cultural texts usually privilege political critique over valorization of positive ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical dimensions to the text. There is in Giroux a perhaps too quick collapse of the aesthetic and textual into the political in some of his readings. This procedure is arguably justified in discussions of films like the works of Tarantino or *Fight Club* (Giroux, forthcoming-b), which aestheticize violence and indeed themselves collapse aesthetics into politics. This is also the case with ad campaigns that Giroux criticizes for their aestheticizing and commodification of youthful bodies, promoting "heroin chic" and other dubious ideals for youth. And Benetton ads or other images that aestheticize urban deprivation and suffering in glossy images also merit sharp critique.

But certain cultural texts have an aesthetic excess, a polysemic overdetermination of meaning, contradictory moments and aspects that can be read against the ideological grain even of conservative texts and those that aestheticize violence. For instance, although I agree with Giroux that Larry Clark's *Kids* is highly problematic and can be read as part of a set of representations and discourses which demonize youth as nihilistic, decadent, and immoral (1997: 45), the film also provides a cautionary morality tale warning of the consequences of causal drug use and unsafe sex. While visiting at Wake Forest University, I attended a showing of the film in which afterwards a visibly shaken audience seriously discussed the danger of AIDS and unsafe sex. There was also a heated discussion of race and representation provoked by the film. Thus while *Kids* does depict urban youth as "decadent and predatory," as Giroux argues, it also allows for a diagnostic critique of children going astray without responsible parenting, or adequate mentoring. The film shows adults as almost completely absent from children's life and society at large as negligent and failing to provide adequate parenting, supervision, education, and spaces to provide youth the opportunity to develop agency, moral responsibility, and healthy communities.

Thus, in addition to political and ideological critique, films and other media texts can be read diagnostically to provide critical insight into contemporary society (see Kellner 1995). Consequently, on one hand, one can agree with Giroux that in films such as *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Clockers* (1995), black male youth are framed through narrow representations that fail to challenge and in effect reiterate the dominant neoconservative image of "blackness as menace and 'other'" (1997: 45). Yet a diagnostic critique can also discern how these films provide insights into the constraints that black youth face and the need to fight the injustice of racial oppression and inequality.⁵ Hence, in addition to enacting ideological and political critique, a critical cultural studies can read texts to gain critical knowledge of their conjuncture and can valorize oppositional or utopian moments that can work against the grain of their otherwise conservative or hegemonic problematics.

Nonetheless, Giroux is right to call for political critique of cultural texts, to take culture seriously as a site of pedagogy and the construction of our sense of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other potent markers of contemporary experience and practice. His politicizing of cultural studies provide a salutary alternative to depoliticizing or aestheticizing cultural studies that either focus on banal consumer use of media artifacts, that refuse ideological or hermeneutical critique, or that flatten cultural texts into one-dimensional non-signifying surfaces as in some "postmodern" versions of cultural studies. By contrast, Giroux's political readings and critique of cultural texts, his contextualizing of media artifacts in the social and political struggles in which they emerge, and his insistent focus on the politics of representation encompassing the full

dimensions of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality provide productive models for cultural studies and critical pedagogy. This work demonstrates the need for their articulation to provide more responsible and responsive theoretical and political models and practice.

Critical Pedagogy, Radical Democracy, and Social Justice

Throughout his work within cultural studies, Giroux sees "culture as the site where identities are constructed, desires mobilized, and moral values shaped" (2000b: 132). Importantly, culture "is the ground of both contestation and accommodation" and "the site where young people and others imagine their relationship to the world; it produces the narratives, metaphors, and images for constructing and exercising a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others" (2000b: 133). Hence, culture is intrinsically pedagogical, it forms, shapes, and cultivates individuals and groups and is thus an important site for radical democratic politics.

While culture can be conservative and shape individuals into conforming to dominant modes of thought and behavior, it also presents a site of resistance and struggle. A critical pedagogy and cultural studies thus attempt to give voice to students to articulate their criticisms of the dominant culture and to form their own subcultures, discourses, styles, and cultural forms. Navigating the tricky and treacherous shoals between those who would claim that culture has nothing to do with politics and would engage in elitist or textualist pedagogy abstracted from concrete political and historical conditions and struggles, contrasted to those, mostly on the Left, who deny that culture is crucial for politics, Giroux wants to insist that both culture and politics have an important pedagogical dimension. In his recent *Impure Acts: The Practical Politics of Cultural Studies* (2000b), Giroux notes the irony that in a time of technological and cultural revolution marked by new media, technology, and forms of culture, there is a crisis of democratic culture. This era is marked, Giroux argues, by rampant consumerism, the suppression of dissent, corporate conglomerate control of major culture sites, and reduction of schooling to prepare students to get better test scores and fit into the new global economy. In this context, he calls upon teachers, theorists, and cultural activists to perceive that "struggles over culture are not a weak substitute for a 'real' politics, but are central to any struggle willing to forge relations among discursive and material relations of power, theory and practice, as well as pedagogy and social change" (2000b: 7).

In the contemporary conjuncture, Giroux stresses the importance for teachers and other cultural workers to reinvigorate democratic culture and to intervene in the new cultural spaces to revitalize democracy. For Giroux, cultural studies deals with media culture contextually and politically, seeing the ways that media texts either reproduce existing relationships of domination and subordination in relation to gender, class, race, and other hierarchies, or resist modes of inequality, injustice and domination. Culture can promote democracy by projecting images of a more egalitarian and just social order, or providing more empowering images of youth, women, people of color, and other oppressed groups. Further, media culture can provide useful moral education, critical knowledge of contemporary conditions, and empowering representations which can help generate more informed, educated, and active subjectivities.

By combining cultural studies and critical pedagogy during the past decade, Giroux took a postmodern turn that saw the potentiality for a reconstructive project democratically transforming education, pedagogy, culture, and society. For Giroux, the new "post" theories

provided the resources for new discourses, pedagogy, practices, and politics. It supplied the material and tools for reinventing education and radical democratic politics. Giroux's main focus was the reconstruction of education and pedagogy in the service of radical democracy. This involved a heightened focus on culture in which cultural studies not only engaged contemporary cultural texts, but helped to cultivate the ability to retrieve histories and imagine new futures. Giroux's critical pedagogy sought not only new media literacies and ways of reading culture, but also ways of reinventing education in the service of a transformative democratic politics.

Thus while some versions of the postmodern turn took their avatars into the realms of increasingly abstract and pretentious discourse, Giroux sought a new language for critical pedagogy and radical democracy.⁶ Whereas some champions of the postmodern turn (especially followers of Baudrillard, Virilio, and some of the more exotic brands of French postmodern theory) fell into a hopeless nihilism and pessimism, perceiving the collapse of Western civilization and modernity in the implosive postmodern realms of new media, technology, and social conditions, Giroux called for a reconstruction of Enlightenment narratives of democracy, emancipation, and social justice and transformation. He sought new subjects for a transformative practice that would help realize the progressive promises of the Enlightenment rather than promoting anti-Enlightenment and anti-rational thought and practice (which themselves, as Habermas constantly reminds us, can be enemies of democracy and social justice).

Avoiding extreme and problematic versions of the postmodern turn, Giroux was able to develop radical critiques of modern theory, pedagogy, and politics, while providing reconstructive alternatives that draw on both modern and postmodern traditions. His reconstructive and radical democratic postmodern politics are evident in his deployment of the categories of identity and difference. Whereas modern theory tends to erase or cover over difference with its emphasis on unified subjects, common culture, universal reason, truth, and values, Giroux defends an affirmation of difference that also articulates shared experiences, goals, and democratic values. Thus, while an extreme postmodern valorization of difference would erase all universals, commonalities, and shared identities, Giroux deploys a dialectic of identity and difference which sees the complexity, multiplicity of social identities and the possibility for producing more democratic and just subjectivities, discourses, and practices.

Likewise, where an extreme postmodern identity politics would verge toward separatism, or reduce politics to construction of highly specific racial, gender, sexual or other identities that often fetishize difference, Giroux calls for a "border politics" where individuals cross over and struggle together for democracy and social justice. Giroux has developed a pedagogy of representation, place, performance, and transformation. His pedagogy of representation and place involve grasping the larger historical contexts that produce various oppressions, resistance and struggle, identity, and differences. His pedagogy of representation involves perceiving how media, education, political discourses and practices, and other institutional forces generate cultural images and discourses that produce and reproduce forms of oppression and domination, but also generate transformative struggles for a freer and more just society. But his pedagogy of representation also involves the construction of subjectivities and practices that would be able to give voice and expression to their own histories, oppressions, and aspiration, to fight against domination and for transformative democracy and social justice. Here Giroux's pedagogy of place cultivates the ability to retrieve hidden or submerged life histories and those of one's groups, to

situate these histories in the political context of the present, and to activate them within the political struggles for the future (see, for instance, Giroux 1993, Chapters 2 and 4).

Thus, Giroux has promoted a pedagogy that cultivates both a retrospective grasp of one's historical past, a perception of the dominant forces of oppression and resistance in the present, and an anticipation of a better future rooted in historical struggle and vision. The pedagogy of place and representation in Giroux's work involves also cultivating a pedagogy of the popular. For it is the popular forms of media culture that often shape an individual's sense of history, the present, and the future, as well as one's understanding of the dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on. Here, cultural studies provides the critical tools to provide competencies that enable teachers, students, and citizens to develop the ability to analyze and criticize cultural representations that promote domination and oppression. It also, as Giroux argues, can help foster resistance and the construction of transformative concepts of history, possibility, and a more democratic and egalitarian configuration of class, gender, racial, and other identities.

But in linking cultural studies with critical pedagogy, Giroux also wants to animate capacities to produce alternative subjectivities and practices in the struggle for radical democracy and social justice. This involves seeing teachers as cultural workers who provide the theory, language, and skills to both dissect the dominant culture and construct a new more democratic culture and more empowered and ethical identities. In this vision, intellectuals and teachers are cultural workers engaged in a struggle to represent the present, past, and future. Giroux has a democratic faith in the potential of teachers, students, and citizens to educate themselves and to struggle together for a better world.

Giroux thus sees cultural politics as encompassing education, artistic work, and the pedagogy of social movements. His performative pedagogy (see the Introduction to Giroux and Shannon 1997 and Giroux 2000b, Chapter 6) attempts to demonstrate how cultural texts enact broader societal and political issues in a pedagogy that makes visible relations of power, domination, and resistance in media culture. For Giroux, educators and radical intellectuals are cultural workers who should struggle to nurture and keep alive democratic culture, educating individuals for democracy and promoting citizenship and moral education. Giroux has always been steadfastly on the Left, but has long opposed a form of Marxist orthodoxy which privileges the working class as the primary agent of social change and that valorizes economic issues over all other cultural, social, or political issues and struggles. In *Living Dangerously* (1993), Giroux wrote: "Contrary to the conventional left thinking,... the greatest challenge to the right and its power may be lodged not in the mobilization of universal agents such as the working class or some other oppressed group, but in a cultural struggle in which almost every facet of daily life takes on a degree of undecidability and thus becomes unsettled and open to broader collective dialogue and multiple struggles" (36).

In particular, Giroux has stressed how education, youth, race, gender, and culture in general have been contested terrains. Schooling, in his view, is a site of struggle between conservative, neo-liberal and more democratic forces -- and continues to be as we enter a new millennium. Likewise, youth is a site of contestation with corporate and conservative forces attempting to colonize, commodify, and control youth, while more democratic and emancipatory forces attempt to educate and empower young people, stressing hope, possibility, and the possibility of collectively creating a better world. The intense struggles over race and gender

during the past decades bring cultural representations and a wealth of political, cultural, and social issues to the fore which require that critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and a radical democratic politics work to struggle for social justice and equality in an environment hostile to such ideals.

As we enter the new millennium, the turbulence of the technological revolution and global restructuring of capitalism creates a volatile situation where established orthodoxies and authorities are becoming questioned, new technologies, discourses, and practices are emerging, and the entire social field is one of contestation between corporate, conservative, neoliberal, and democratizing forces. Giroux's contribution over the past decades has been to always side with radical democratizing forces on the issues of the restructuring of education, political transformation, and a democratization of all forms of social, political, and cultural life. Giroux thus advances forms of radical democratization and social justice which balance support for civil rights, an egalitarian democratic culture, and a revitalized public sphere with respect for difference. This project provides marginal and excluded voices a chance to participate and creates the democratic institutions -- schooling, media, cultural forms, public spaces, and so on -- which make possible a genuine participatory democracy. It directs critical pedagogy and cultural studies to struggle for democratization and against injustice and not just to provide more sophisticated methods of reading cultural texts. In these ways, Giroux encourages those of us involved in the project of cultural studies to not forget democratic politics and social struggle as we attend to our pedagogical and public performances.

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Notes

1. For his first sustained presentation of the importance of cultural studies for critical pedagogy and the reconstruction of education, see Giroux 1992: 161ff; on the need for a richer understanding of culture, cultural politics, and pedagogy than in conventional orthodoxies, see Giroux 1992: 180ff; some of the positions in his cultural turn were anticipated in Giroux and Simon 1989. For my own takes on media culture and cultural studies, see Kellner 1995.

2. Giroux also co-edited a series of books on critical pedagogy and cultural studies, signalling the collaborative nature of the enterprise; see Giroux and Simon 1989; Giroux and McLaren 1989 and 1994; Giroux, McLaren, Lankshear, and Cole 1994; and Giroux and Shannon 1997. One might also cite Giroux's collaborations with Stanley Aronowitz who also worked to combine cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and radical democratic politics (1991 and 1994).

3. For an excellent study of the ongoing and escalating war against youth, see Giroux's recent paper on "Zero Tolerance and Mis/Education: Youth and the Politics of Domestic Militarization" (forthcoming).

4. For my own analysis of the political attack on rap in the early 1990s, see Kellner 1995, Chapter Four.

5. Giroux's reading of Juice is more nuanced and provides a better context for productive engagement with contemporary films dealing with black urban youth (1996: 39ff). While Giroux is rightfully concerned that the film could help promote "white panic" and negative images of black youth, he notes the critique of violence in the film. While I would agree with Giroux (1996: 44) that one needs to go beyond mainstream Hollywood films to texts like Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust or Leslie Harris's Just Another Girl on the IRT to find more progressive and complex representations of African-Americans, I would argue that even films which have negative representations can be engaged by a critical cultural studies to produce productive discussions and insights into contemporary social conditions and the dynamics of race, gender,

class, and other sites of representation.

6. For Giroux's defense of theoretical language, see 1993, Chapter 6 and 1994, Chapter 6. In retrospect, I would agree with Giroux on the usefulness of theory and need for new theoretical languages to describe new social, cultural, and political conditions and to develop more complex discourses to capture the turbulence, intense changes, and novelties of the present. But in the present conjuncture, I would want to mediate between those who call for clarity and accessibility in discourse and writing contrasted to those who defend high theory and complexity. Hence, while I believe it was salutary to appropriate and deploy the new theoretical discourse of the past decades, and have done so myself, I think in the present conjuncture, it is important to try to become as clear and accessible as possible. Moreover, I would argue that a virtue of Giroux's recent work is that it is indeed more lucid and accessible to a broader public than his late 1980s and early 1990s work when he was himself, as were many of us, learning new languages and developing new theories and pedagogies. Finally, I would suggest that engaging the new cyberculture and transformations of education and everyday life brought on by new technologies requires complex theoretical language and analysis, as well as new pedagogies and a democratic restructuring of education; see Kellner, forthcoming.