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Youth and Regression in an Infantile Society

John Zerzan

Among the young there are quite a few examples of a tendency to regress or turn back. Whether or not these phenomena are characteristic of something called “Generation X” we must leave for media to determine; after all, it’s their job to define and make intelligible social reality. That aside, I think there are aspects of regression that are noteworthy/possibly significant, and which need to be put in context.

Childhood was once a place of refuge, a secure zone of protection and innocence. For some time, however, as with every other part of life, the commodity and its attendant forms of violence have invaded this sphere. And yet it continues to represent a sort of haven, if some youth fashions are any indication. The waif look and Dr. Seuss-style clothes reflect this yearning to go back to a relatively better time and place. Seeing teens in oversized shirts and sweaters, for example, the sleeves hiding their hands, gives one a pronounced impression that they fear where they’re headed and would like to be small children again.

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Retrieved on April 22nd, 2009 from www.primitivism.com

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Popular forms of speech are another site of regression, it is possible to argue. Making statements into questions by the use of rising intonation is a type of stepping back from reality. The declarative sentence becomes an entreaty, “am I right in making even the most innocuous assertion?” The speaker unconsciously questions his or her ability to say anything straightforwardly.

The infinitely overused “like”, as ubiquitous qualifier, also seems to signify a reversion, or evasion of adulthood. As in the case of putting a question mark on every utterance, “like” bespeaks an indirectness that borders on fear of connecting with reality. “We like went to the heach.” Did you go or not? Reigning pop culture screenwriter Quentin Tarentino cannot seem to refrain from “like” in his own speech, an instance of postmodern semi-literacy. In the high-tech age of virtual reality perhaps reality is becoming virtual in a less noticed sense than VR.

Which brings to mind the tendency toward illiteracy itself. While certainly not confined to the young generation, this development is less one of others’ losing their literacy that it is of youth having less interest in adopting it than in previous times. The young Sartre once proclaimed that “No-one has written a word of truth about us.” Non-literacy is in a very important sense a reaction to the tremendous accumulation of lies that comprises modern culture and everyday life.

Television, a passive and in that respect childish form of mass media, has never been so widely consumed. Today’s youth are not the first TV generation, but are more and more subject to what is often even stupider than before. Sociologist Vicki Abt revealed in fall 1994 her estimation, based on the study of 1,000 hours of Oprah, Donahue, and Sally Jessy Raphael, that 90 percent of the guests are illiterate. She draws the unmistakable conclusions as to the effects on viewers’ literacy levels. To be obsessed with entertainment is reportedly a characteristic of “twentysomethings”. And why not? Who

Who would legitimately feel anything but the need to “regress” in the opposite direction of such a non-future?

could feel more betrayed in the desert of late capitalist nothingness than those most immersed in its recent worsening, and more desperately in need of diversion from its horrors?

Today’s music exhibits the themes of regression with a vengeance, or, I suppose one should say, without a vengeance. Doe-eyed gamin Kate Bush (“Mother Stands for Comfort,” “The Warm Room”) tends toward a retreat to childhood, while album cover art displays takes on kiddies, dolls, and the like (from groups like Dinosaur Jr., Stone Temple Pilots, Mutha’s Day Out, Babes in Toyland, Sonic Youth). Nowhere was this more graphic than with Nirvana, whose third and final album was called *In Utero*. Returning to the womb was a recurring theme of Kurt Cobain, the anguished wail of one whose childhood could certainly not be taken for an idyll, in life or art. His regression was driven to its furthest point, in life and art.

If punk in the late ’70s drew on a vital rage, rock today, to generalize grandly, is more about powerlessness, fear, violation, confusion. Not that any of this is exactly new. The notebooks of Theodor Adorno fifty years ago were the basis for his *Minimalia Moralia*, a collection of short pieces that was subtitled *Reflections on Damaged Life*. He referred to his own damage; life in divided society is no abstraction, it damages each of us increasingly. In *The New Yorker* (March 7, 1994), reviewer Terrence Rafferty complained that the movie *Reality Bites* failed to give a clear picture of the new generation; it left one feeling “puzzled and vaguely crummy.” Soon after, a letter to the editor by Josh Cohen provided this reply: “I hate to be the one to tell him this, but feeling puzzled and vaguely crummy pretty much is the experience of the new generation.”

Under “regression” one might add the seemingly more common occurrence of young adults returning to live with their parents. In a context of so few jobs that pay relatively decent wages, many cannot afford to do otherwise. Beyond that fact of life, there is a widespread rejection of white-collar careerism. But this refusal, in the absence of grounds for idealism, does not

translate into freely chosen poverty or marginality. Thus, unlike the young in the '60s or even '70s, more choose to live with parents or accept, where possible, major support from them.

Depression has been widely touted as endemic to the twentysomething generation, which explains the resonance of books like Elizabeth Wurtzel's confessional *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America* (1994). As psychologist Martin Seligman's best-selling 1990 *Learned Optimism* put it, "Severe depression is 10 times more prevalent today than it was 50 years ago, and it strikes a full decade earlier in life on average than it did a generation ago." Among the news of rising drug use and its incidence among younger and younger age groups, there were two national studies in 1994 concerning the "startling" increase of binge drinking by college students, especially women. They reported rampant alcohol abuse leading to violence, vandalism, and other types of aggression.

Such feelings and behaviors testify to frustration and despair that have nowhere to go when the social landscape is so frozen. Disaffection or even opposition are quickly marketed into salable style images; alienation as fashion. Meanwhile suicide, perhaps the ultimate regression, has been on a steady rise for several decades. And not just in the U.S., by the way. In Japan, Wataru Tsurumi's *Complete Manual of Suicide* (1993) sold over 200,000 copies in its first few months, chiefly to those under thirty.

Eating disorders are trademark afflictions of today's young people and mirror the powerlessness of one's very early years. To not eat harks back to the stage at which this choice is almost the only option for protest. Retreating from the world of school, occupations, etc., it constitutes, according to Kim Chernin's *The Hungry Self* (1985), "an extremely effective way to stop the movement into the world."

For the past couple of decades or so, the psychological model of the individual has been that of Narcissus, named for the self-absorbed mythological figure. The popular *Culture of Narcis-*

ism by Christopher Lasch (1979) was part of the shift from the earlier long-standing Oedipus personality paradigm. Today's dominant type is now one of longing for the absence of unsatisfied yearnings, a harkening back to an original unity/wholeness/perfection. The young, as might be surmised, are pre-eminently bearers of this recently arrived ethos, one which is primarily defined as a regression. Narcissistic disappointment, often termed "unrealistic," cannot accept the essentially "mediocre" nature of ordinary life (Kernberg 1988). Thus it is easy to see that narcissism is part of a general movement away from sacrifice and repression and thus has subversive potential. Of course, it is also true that there are common weaknesses in this personality orientation, such as self-absorption which takes no notice of the nature of society and hence neglects to question it. New Age solipsism is a perfect example of this tendency.

All narcissistic types, according to Bursten (1986) are capable of flying into rages. This is related to the commonly-seen trait of narcissistic humiliation; the intolerable sense of injury and impotence contains the implicit threat of its forceful reversal. In this context, it doesn't seem out of place to mention that there has been, since the 1960s, a large literature linking narcissism and "terrorism."

Taking account of regressive features among some of the young, one has to recognize in these features at least a somewhat justified strategy, on whatever level it could be said to be such. The world that youth are expected to enter and reproduce is bankrupt, fearsome, and without prospects.

In fact, it is far more infantile in its workings and categories than in the defenses against it that youth erect for their own integrity. Not only, as a foundation of modern life, does the encroaching high-tech principle render us all daily more dependent; the institutions of society — and media is only the most glaring example — are themselves infantile and infantilizing.