Futurama: The Role of Educators in Young People's Lives

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Introduction

If you want to recapture your youth, just cut off his allowance. Al Bernstein.

Whenever this amorphous, difficult, feared, celebrated and fascinating group collectively referred to as "young people" are discussed, as they so often are, *who* exactly is it that is being spoken of or for? Those who fall between the ages of twelve and twenty? Thirteen to thirty-year-olds? Or do we include those who feel and act young regardless of their chronological age? And when we confer about young people in relation to the future, *how* do we discuss them and what particular future are we referring to? Individual futures, social futures or global futures? And finally, what is the relationship of those that aren't considered "youthful" or as "young people" to those that are? How do they contribute to a vision of young people and a future – if at all? Is the relationship between young people and older people a comfortable one with open lines of communication and understanding? Is it complex, diverse, tense and demanding? Or is it all these things combined? This paper seeks to probe these questions in light of the conference theme: framing vision, challenging futures, by focussing on young people and the complexities of their relationships to each other, adult culture, including popular culture, the media, educational institutions and religion. This paper does not pretend to

answer the problems it either raises or acknowledges – but it will address them and in doing so perhaps challenge current visions of young people and the frames that are structured around them to either protect, limit or inspire. It will also aspire to mapping a future direction for all of us – the various educators that play a role in shaping young people's futures.

Before I examine these forces and forms that both empower and disempower young people, depending on their relationship to the form, I want to explain why I prefer the term young people to "youth" and why the term "youth culture" is such a problematic and artificial construction.

The term "youth" is most often used to describe young people when they refuse to model their behaviour on what the parent culture considers appropriate (Oswell, 1998: 38). Young people are frequently represented as "out of control" and as a threat, not only to the hierarchical foundations of society, but most importantly, to themselves.

Furthermore, the category "youth" endlessly shifts and slides between the binary opposites of adult/child, innocence/knowledge and power/powerlessness, disrupting the essentialism of these psychological and social sites and causing discomfort in adult circles. As David Oswell argues, "'[y]outh' defines a moment of disturbance: a space *in between*" (1998: 38). Instead of being empowered as a liminal site, this "between" space is reconfigured as a "geography of exclusion" (1998: 46) where youth are always located as neither/nor – neither adult, nor child – and refused a legitimate voice and individual power. Denied any political agency, young people are narrated in social, cultural and even educational spheres by voices that turn "youth" itself into an "empty category inhabited by the desires, fantasies, and interests of the adult world" (Giroux,

1997: 35). Thus, images of youth are (re)located in a circuit of cultural exchange where they are defined by generational politics and the ideologies of an older generation (Grossberg, 1997: 484-5; Davis, 1997).

Word associations are automatically deployed to justify and indeed reify the adult culture's attitudes to young people. Binaries such as: youth and crime, youth and drugs, youth and unemployment, and youth and gangs are frequently employed by the media to arouse an acute psychosocial antipathy towards young people that is difficult to invalidate. Specificity around these terms develops and excludes other age groups, despite the fact that statistics and popular evidence reveal that social phenomenon such as unemployment, drugs, gangs and crime are not exclusive to young people. Yet, by limiting access to these terms through their unproblematic association with youth, adult culture is removed from the negative connotations surrounding them and is instead identified clearly as part of the "solution", not the "problem". The linking of these terms with a range of undesirable youthful behaviours also, as Stuart Hitchings explains, "whip[s] up fear and distrust of young people [which] is central to the onslaught of repressive legislation aimed at youth" (2000: 78). This polarization once more legitimates young people's inability/prohibition to access any knowledge or power except that "approved" by the older generations.

Keeping in mind the problematic connotations around the word "youth", I will, in a lexical strategy, use the term "young people" to describe males and females who fall roughly between the ages of ten to twenty-five, but without, I hope, being exclusive.

I would also like to explain the term "educators" in my paper's title. Educators' refers to those individuals, institutions and forms that have the opportunity if not the

means to open up a dialogue between themselves and young people. For example, obvious role models and influences such as parents, the broader family, teachers, employers, but most importantly, peers. Together they provide an eclectic, formal and informal education that shapes young people's vision and, to a degree, posits frames and possible futures.

The other group of extraordinarily influential educators that are too often ignored are those embedded in all forms of popular culture. The influence of popular culture as an educational tool in the broadest sense cannot be underestimated. Nor can its capacity to frame visions and identities as well as challenge futures. But before I turn to the role of popular culture in young and not-so-young lives, I want to focus on the adult world and how various constructions of young people and youth culture are developed.

Building Bridges

Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers. Socrates

From the outside looking in, it appears that young people today are experiencing a multitude of problems, familial, social, educational and above all personal. The increase in dilemmas faced seems concomitant with the complexity of life in the new, globalised and technocratic millennium. Young people enter a world which, from the moment of birth, bombards them with over 400,000 images a year. These images which are received from various media such as television, films, music, magazines, internet sites and advertisements become a window through which the world is first viewed or, more accurately, filtered. Despite this bombardment, young people still seek to engage

with the world at large and manage to find their place in it using all the media (and more) at their disposal. It should be no surprise then that, despite amazing advances in all fields of endeavour, the major concern of today's young people differs little from generations ago: namely, "who am I?" and "what is my life purpose?" In other words, young people today are as concerned about finding and establishing an identity as they have been since ancient times – it is only that the means through which they try and achieve this have become so dense, different and confusing, that the journey is for many harder and longer and the support systems which used to exist are either refused or not activated in appropriate ways.

This may be because, as Professor Michael Carr-Gregg, an adolescent psychologist based in Melbourne notes, teenagers today give the impression of being more capable than they really are. This is partly because they reach puberty earlier and have the ability to appear older and, naturally, want to be thought of in that way. He says:

> Young people are being prematurely empowered by a combination of physical maturity, powerful peer groups and a mass marketing machine that makes them feel more sophisticated and more able than they actually are. They look like young adults but they don't have the skills to match (2004: 21).

Desperate to be conceived of as adults, these prematurely empowered young people often leap into the adult world before they are ready, rather than taking the time and learning the skills to cross it with ease. This is because being a young person in today's society has few, if any, benefits.

The Fountain of Youth

You don't have to suffer to be a poet; adolescence is enough suffering for anyone. John Ciardi

How society feels about young people is largely determined by how they are represented and imagined in popular culture (Giroux, 1997: 2). When it comes to young people, there is a tendency to homogenize them and present youth culture as somehow "monolithic and unidimensional" (Mallan and Pearce, 2003: ix). However, as Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce so poetically phrase it, "like shards of glass from a broken mirror, the image of youth in contemporary western societies is always fragmented… and thus resists a coherent and stable identity" (2003: ix-x). For me, however, as an educator, parent, writer and citizen, the external image of youth as portrayed in mainstream culture is not fragmented enough. There is in our Western community a tendency to understand young people as one great, undifferentiated body where class, religious, gender, sexual and ethnic differences are removed, and this is often reflected in the media, education, and in society's expectations of young people.

Historically, relationships between the older and younger generations have always been fraught with ideological, emotional, social and psychological differences, which are often expressed by phrases such as "you don't understand me,' which, in effect, is an articulation of the generation gap and its enormity. Jonathon S. Epstein states, "social scientists and cultural critics have long been both intrigued and confused by youth. Young people, after all, sometimes seem like a completely different species from adults and their habits, idiosyncrasies and argot have long mystified grown-ups" (1998: 1).

From the 1950s on, this notion of young people being a different species, aliens, was actively encouraged by corporations who saw in young people a potential and

exciting market. The term “teenagers” was invented and for the first time in history, adolescence was accorded a recognisable status and a whole new market exploded. Rock music, fashion, TV shows, advertising, and films were aimed at this demographic with extraordinary results. From Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis to Marilyn Manson; from *Rebel Without a Cause* to *Trainspottng, KIDS* and the recent controversial film, *Thirteen*. From Mini skirts to G-strings and bare-midriffs; from mullets to number ones and outrageous colour and styles. From *Happy Days* to *Beavis and Butthead*, not only has the youth market been a lucrative and constantly changing force that has spawned new roles for its progenitors, who are referred to as “merchants of cool”, it has also begun to expand, capturing the pre-teen market, tweenagers, and the self-indulgent group of kidults or adulescents.[1] So self-evident and deliberate is this marketing

[1] Through particular modes of production and imagery, corporate society harnesses the essence of youth and sells back to the adult culture an anti-aging formula. By targeting those euphemistically referred to as the “young at heart”, a range of products are skewed towards the 25-50 year-old demographic so that they may “relive their youth” (Lloyd, 2000: 52). According to a number of manufacturers such as Sony, Lego, Nokia and Swatch, the emphasis on various items designed for the entertainment of “kidults” -- the aging baby boomer -- has substantially increased (Lloyd, 2000: 50-57). Hugh Mackay writes that the reason for this preoccupation with toys and accessories normally associated with young people, such as Playstations, fashionable watches, mobile phones, scooters and sophisticated Lego goods, is because there is a recognizable body of adult consumers who desire to surround themselves with products that advance and maintain the illusion of youth. According to Mackay:

> Their apparently “elastic adolescence”, stretching all the way into middle age, may not be about to snap, but it’s beginning to look pretty thin. Some of them will decide it’s time to settle down to the serious business of planning and saving for retirement. Others, with every prospect of earning good money well into their sixties, will embark on a fresh round of spending, especially on recreational and “experiential” pursuits, and on items like sports cars or cosmetic surgery that might sustain the adolescent fantasy for a little longer. (qtd. in Lloyd, 2000: 52)

The obsession with youth and the commodification of a specific period of a subject’s life in order to artificially recapture and sustain it can be understood in terms of a cultural necrophilia (Peretti, 1998:19), that is, a love of a specific temporal period concomitant with attitudes that, for the adult subject, are no longer applicable: they are dead. It is indicative of an aging generation of “adulescents” that continue to blur the distinction between themselves and people half their age by consuming and validating the hip and fashionable and spouting ideologies that are irrelevant in terms of the position and economic power they now hold (Peretti, 1998: 16). Jacques Peretti refers to these people as “middle youth”: that is, those in their “late-twenties/early thirties middle-income professionals looking back to their youth and forward to middle age at a single glance” (1998:15). Furthermore, according to Peretti, these people now have the power, as the editors, television producers and “demographics people at ad agencies” to create youth in their own nostalgic image and become fashionable all over again by marketing back to other adolescents and young people fixed notions of youth style (1998:16). In the process, youth and youthfulness are transformed into another form of mass consumption, and the notion of rebellion and opposition

strategy, that it has even spawned parodies, such as in the recent movie hit, *Josie and the Pussycats*.

This deliberate representation and marketing of adolescence and youth culture has an interesting and, arguably cultivated, side-effect. When the public, young and not-so-young, are continually inundated with images of young people being reckless, experimenting with sex, drugs and alcohol, adorning themselves in particular clothes and accoutrements, inscribing their bodies and ritualizing their appearance, it starts to be regarded as "normal". That is, a mindset develops that responds to these manufactured images as "truth," and as representing all young people.

As Epstein, Angela McRobbie and Stuart Hall argue:

> mass media accounts… become part of the phenomenon of youth culture itself by focusing on the spectacular aspects of adolescence, such as its artefacts, dress, drug use, subcultural style and idiom – thus the media contribute more to the "myth" of youth …culture… than to an academic understanding of it (see Epstein, 1998: 8).

From the 1980s on, there has been a marked social shift in the attitude towards young people in broader social and political spheres which indicate that far from nurturing young people and their hopes for the future, they have not only become the lowest national priority (Giroux, 1997: 37), they are being held accountable for society's faults.

As Henry Giroux writes, "the discourse on youth shifts from an emphasis on social failings in the society to questions of individual character, social policy moves from the language of social investment – creating safety nets for children – to the

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to the mainstream into a fad: one that is forever "functional, fashionable and fun" (Lloyd, 2000: 52) for people of all ages.[1]

language of containment and blame" (17). These oppositional classifications of young people as either *dangerous* or *in danger* pathologize youth and youth culture, and institutionalize a way of reading "youth" that is reflected in various popular cultural forms (Oswell 38-9) such as those listed above.

Guiding, Not Pushing.

I am not young enough to know everything. Oscar Wilde

Part of the process of maturation and self-development for young people is the bridging of the gap between adolescence and adulthood. What adult culture has to do is make the *act* of bridging, the *journey,* around, backwards and forwards and through the gap, as opposed to the *destination*, as rewarding as possible. That way, it won't be such a shock when young people cross the threshold and realise that the adult world, if it even exists, isn't all it's cracked up to be!

There is recent evidence to suggest that not only has adult culture made the journey fraught with unnecessary tensions, but we've committed a greater crime. Not only have we made it difficult for young people to learn to become adults, there is strong evidence to suggest that we haven't even allowed them to be children.

Dr John Irvine astutely noted on Channel Seven Sunrise last year that not only do we have to acknowledge the importance of child protection in every sphere of life, but also *childhood* protection – one in which those precious years of childhood are valued (See Whiting, 2003: 58-59). Childhood is being lost, demonstrated in the increasing number of children, some as young as eight years old, suffering from

dysmorphic body image. Child and adolescent psychiatrist, Dr Sloane Madden, directly attributes this to the plethora of adult themes images directly targeted towards and for children (Whiting, 2003: 58). These are the same prepubescent children who are taught to adulate celebrity and who have adult clothing, such as bras and G-strings, and other accessories marketed directly to them.

In placing unnecessary burdens on our young and encouraging them to enter the adult world before they're ready, and rewarding them for doing so (at a cultural as well as familial level), we've created a generation of young people ill-equipped emotionally and psychologically to survive not just the journey, but arrival, making them at the least afraid, and at the worst unable, to make the transition. While it is hard to identify precisely how this has happened, some early culprits are: popular cultural representations of young people, marketing, contemporary parenting techniques and education.

Between the ages of 12 and 17, for example, a parent ages as much as 20 years. Anonymous

There have been a number of studies done in recent years, whereby specialists working in childhood development have examined parenting and child rearing techniques across a range of institutions (family, school etc.) and evaluated outcomes. These are by no means the first type of studies. In the 60s and 70s, Dr Benjamin Spock produced a seminal and very liberal text on child-rearing in which he advocated positive reinforcement and allowing children complete freedom of expression – all of which he famously recounted once he became a father.

According to recent research on the current generation of young people, sometimes euphemistically referred to as Generation Net, NeXt, Y or “click and go” (Margo, 2004: 20), it appears that Spock’s retraction was not heard. Instead of heeding his experiential advice, parents, teachers, guardians and even employers, embraced his ideals of positive reinforcement at all cost. No longer were children and later young adults, given appropriate consequences for actions, they were negotiated with from a ridiculously young age, discipline was rendered obsolete and policed, children were indulged, given lavish praise for the smallest achievement and told to ignore their failings which were quickly transformed into triumphs.

In the new millennium, we are reaping the rewards of this style of parenting and education, one in which failure, socially, educationally and emotionally, are now the new accomplishments.

As Sue Corrigan reported, in the *Courier Mail* (2004: 31):

> Since the 1970s, the dominant ideology has been that children must be praised at every possible opportunity, never criticised or chastised, to boost self-esteem and protect their supposedly fragile egos. [The result of this has been that] we’ve produced a generation of pompous, self-important youngsters with a massively over-inflated view of their talents and abilities, unable to conceive of themselves as fallible and, therefore, unable to cope graciously [if at all] with life’s harsher realities.

This coddled generation who are very apparent in the US, and can also be found in Australia and elsewhere in the world, are suffering from what psychiatrists are calling TMPR syndrome – that is, Too Much Positive Reinforcement. The result of this is an increase in anti-social behaviour and an inability to take constructive criticism.

American psychiatrist, Robert Shaw, describes contemporary society as toxic to kids, not because of the net or the media, but because of over-indulgent parents. He

states: “The behaviour [temper tantrums, whining, sullenness] of these joyless children is so common, many no longer consider it abnormal. We rationalise it and call it a phase or a stage” (2004: 31). Shaw also sites the over-diagnosing of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as an example of the tendency to explain what are really spoilt or antisocial behaviours and the subsequent prescription of psychoactive drugs to “cure” the condition:

> We used to be clearer about the importance of parenting, but we’ve forgotten what children require to grow into happy, responsible adults…. The whole issue of self-confidence or self-esteem has attained a trendy almost cult-like status. It should be a natural product of a healthy, productive life lived by fully developed children… self-esteem as portrayed by the current generation of pop psychologists is nothing less than self-worship (2004: 31).

This is an approach midwife and early childhood expert Jane Barry would accord with. She believes that:

> [T]wo of the greatest attributes we can encourage in our kids are a *healthy* [my italics] self-esteem and self-confidence. One of the ways to achieve these is for kids to solve problems successfully and for them to be able to master skills independently” (2004: 5).

Here Barry implies that young people should not only be invited to work things out for themselves, but to enjoy (or endure) the consequences of their decisions and actions. To over-protect them or intervene and “rescue” them from consequences may build self-esteem and confidence, but at what cost and will it be healthy?

Evidence strongly suggests it won’t and here it is important to acknowledge the benefits of hindsight. On the contrary, to always reinforce young people’s behaviour, good and bad, creates what British social commentator Melanie Phillips described as “all must have prizes” ideology.

This ideology has infected our education system to such a degree that teachers, parents, adult culture and even young people are demanding redress. Not only are there calls for reforms to teacher/student relations and policies around aberrant and dangerous classroom behaviour, but to report writing and curriculum development. According to an article in *The Sunday Mail* on the 8th February this year, Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson admitted that "primary schools in particular now routinely sugar-coated students' results and refused to acknowledge failures." This can be read as a salute to the "all must have prizes" syndrome. Nelson has said that policies will be reintroduced allowing teachers to fail students and force them to repeat a year if they do not make standards.

Furthermore, in an effort to right a system collapsing under the weight of its own good intentions, report writing has also come under close scrutiny. For years now, parents have complained about the obscure terminology in report cards, saying it's unclear to them what teachers are saying about their children. This is because the language is deliberately obfuscated with educators being too afraid to "say it as it is." This has occurred partly to kow-tow to this notion of positive reinforcement, but also to satisfy unrealistic parents who cannot accept that their "genius" is in fact normal. Teacher accountability has become infected with language such as "emerging" and "developing", terms that are pedagogical fairy floss – safe in small quantities and easy to digest leaving no after taste or memory of consumption.

But it isn't simply ways of communicating young people's performance that has to change, it is what is being emphasised in the curriculum. A shift from the acquisition of

knowledge as an appropriate outcome in itself, to the development of life-long thinking skills needs to occur in order to give young people a future.

Roderick Bruce, a retired university lecturer and high school teacher, made the observation that while,

> [T]he gaining of knowledge is a vital aspect of education… it has never been sufficient. You must be able to do something with the knowledge. The thinking skills that enable the students to use the knowledge are at least equally important. In the age of life-long learning, acquiring knowledge is secondary to developing thinking skills (2003: 8).

Bruce discusses the changes in curriculum wrought in the 1970s where not only were children encouraged to stay at school longer, but maths and science were advocated as appropriate subjects for study. However, the maths and science curricula were considered very difficult and so were made more descriptive to overcome this. This was partly due to an attempt to make "masculine" subjects more female-friendly. However, what occurred was that rote learning became the pedagogical style, not just in maths and science, but across most curricula. This has lead to a generation of young people with poor thinking skills. Taught to rote learn rather than think, they are unable to problem solve and so flounder, not just as tertiary level but in the workplace as well resulting in depression and problematic self esteem (see Bruce, 2003: 8).

Blessed are the young for they shall inherit the national debt. Herbert Hoover

If the positive aspects of contemporary life are sometimes hard to identify, young people also have to contend with growing up in a world where they continually hear adult generations bemoaning their imaginary (arcadian) past, where they are

experiencing radical alterations in family structure, brought about by changes in attitude to marriage, high divorce rates, as well as social changes wrought by feminism and a dramatic shift in gender roles. Yet again, despite young people's personal familial experiences, a "correct" model continues to be offered which not only has the potential to invalidate their understanding of family, but renders it incomplete. The terms "broken home" and "latch-key child" are examples of this. Young people are regularly exposed to information about the systematic abuse and exploitation of young people, seen in previously unassailable religious and educational institutions which are now being placed under legal and public scrutiny and being held accountable for unspeakable personal and civic damage. In their brave new world, every stranger is a potential danger – literally. They've also seen first hand economic downsizing which has meant that too many have most likely witnessed their parents' jobs or businesses placed at risk. They are on the cusp of entering the adult world of high unemployment, where despite this fact, the term "dole-bludger" still circulates. They are told to succeed at high school at all costs – regardless that those costs might be their emotional and psychological well-being and to make a career choice which directly impacts upon their future while still only 16 or 17. And they have watched the notion of home ownership, the stereotypical Australian dream, transform into an impossible one.

University is increasingly becoming a preferred option (by whom?) and yet, higher education is growing increasingly expensive and hence unavailable and/or vocationally orientated, disaffecting those with genuine academic leanings.

Most importantly, young people today are living through the horror of terrorism with September 11, Bali, Spain and its shocking consequences still firmly etched in their

psyches. They've seen and heard discourses of vengeance, watched religious fundamentalism of the worst kind (and I'm not just referring to the Islamic world). The world they are being primed to inherit is at war and for many of them, has been since they were born. Is it any wonder some are questioning, not only God's purpose, but whether this omniscient being even exists.

The country our young people are taught to be proud of is still emerging into the global arena – and not without ambivalent reception. They've seen and heard Australia being hailed as a great host nation and part of the coalition of the willing with the Sydney Olympics and Howard's unequivocal support of the US invasion of Iraq respectively. They've seen it being disparaged and asked to account for the same support and for its problematic human rights record with Indigenous people and refugees – the latter exemplified with the TAMPA incident.

Brought up in a so-called globalised world, which for most young Australians signifies little more than a conflictual relationship with US culture, regardless of ethnic or cultural origins, young people are being told one thing and experiencing another – good and bad. Caught between childhood freedom and the world of adult responsibility, certain tensions begin to assert themselves. Young people are pulled towards the maelstrom of the adult politics, employment and independence, which demands a degree of conformity, while simultaneously being drawn towards their familiar space and state of unreadiness and where they can, with relative safety, experiment with different versions of the self. It is in this gap or space, between child and adult, that the process of alienation commences (see Epstein, 1998: 4) – alienation from the self, from family and school. The behaviour that manifests during this period is often so at odds with

what the young person will become that this stage is pathologised and psychoanalysed and that adolescents are culturally depicted as a different species.

Pop Goes Culture

A wasted youth is better by far than a wise and productive old age. Meat Loaf, from the song "Wasted Youth" on the album *Bat Out of Hell II*

When a young person feels alienated, it is natural for them to seek new avenues of identification and connection. In striving to find a meaning for their existence, and discovering only an endless road littered with contradictory answers, young people often seek affiliations that will help confirm not only who they are, but where they are going (see Hebidge, 1979 and Epstein, 1998). These affiliations can take the form of peer groups, subcultural allegiances or even bodily inscriptions such as piercings or tattoos. The search may manifest through the music they listen to, the programs they watch, the sites they visit on the internet or even the books and magazines they read.

Educators often become alarmed by what they see young people accessing: partly because they worry about potential negative influences a certain form may have (a subculture; song lyrics), but also because they feel what the young person is investing their time and energy into is not worthy.

There is, however, enormous amounts of evidence to demonstrate that not only are these affiliations an important part of any person's psychosocial development, but that they play an intrinsic role in the overall education of young people as well.

According to Ron Taffel, a New York based child therapist, the phenomenon of the second family that is, a group of friends with whom a teenagers share values and

identity and which sets standards of behaviour, is becoming increasingly common – especially when parents both work, and can't or won't monitor their children's emotional progress (quoted in Margo, 2004: 21). This second family can also include a virtual one: that is, a subculture or peer group accessed on line.

Susan Sawyer, director of adolescent medicine at Royal Children's Hospital acknowledges the fears that many educators have around young people and IT. She tries to alleviate these when she says:

> While there is a lot of anxiety among parents, educationalists and health professionals about teenagers involvement in contemporary IT there is very little evidence that the majority of them are being harmed by participation in it. Our concerns are overstated. Studies being presented at international meetings are very reassuring. I think parents should be vigilant, but they should be less fearful (Margo, 2004: 21).

US cultural critic and leading educational expert, Henry Giroux, has long argued about the major role of popular culture, including IT, in young people's lives. He states that:

> Young people today live in an electronically mediated culture for which channel surfing, moving quickly from one mode of communication to another, becomes the primary method through which they are educated (Giroux, 1997: 5).

These channels include television, film, magazines, even mobile phones and of course, the infinite realm of cyberspace. How do schools, parents, families, the church and other adults that interact with and constitute aspects of a young persons' life compete or work with these other enticing modes to assist in the formation of our children's identities?

Giroux recognises the difficulties facing young people and more traditional forms of education when he writes that:

> Learning in the postmodern age is located elsewhere – in the popular spheres, organized around rap music, daytime television, fanzines, Hollywood films, sprawling shopping malls, and computer… culture, that shape young people's identities through forms of knowledge and desire that are absent from what is taught in high schools. The literacies of the postmodern age are electronic, aural, and image-based… (Giroux, 1997: 32).

If we agree with Giroux that these contemporary literacies are a feature of modern worldly education, what is the role of the more traditional modes and the adult culture that helps deliver them? Particularly when adult culture is so often depicted as being at odds with contemporary popular culture, never mind young peoples' visions.

My first response is to suggest that despite numerous representations that suggest adult culture is "out of touch" with young people, this is not the case. Clearly, while there are those who possess no desire to even attempt to navigate youthful terrain, there are also those in the corporate world who make a living out of not only seeking to understand youth culture but, more significantly, creating it.[2] Phillip Adams has scathingly referred to these individuals and their businesses as corporate paedophilia.

For the rest of us, it becomes incumbent to stay as informed about youth culture and young people as we are able. Sometimes, the only way to do this is by sharing a variety of what our children and students find important and readily consume. This means immersing ourselves to a degree in their culture so that we can glean an understanding of ourselves and our children. Being able to talk (in a non-disparaging

[2] The relationship between these corporate individuals, youth culture and young people will be discussed later in the paper.

way) about a young person's favourite song, Playstation game, chatroom, film or TV show, goes a long way towards establishing communication. "Being time-poor, self-indulgent and overwhelmed by [your life]" (Carr-Gregg, quoted in Margo, 2004: 21), is no excuse for not attempting to make an effort to know the young person in your care. As Carr-Gregg wryly notes, "It's almost as if for …[parents], their children interfere with their own life goals… Many teenagers could be forgiven for thinking they are not cared for" (2004: 21).

One way of demonstrating that you do care is to show an active interest in what captivates young people – but not in a know-all or judgemental way. Before this can happen, an educator must first abandon their critieria for evaluating what's worthwhile or appropriate and secondly, become a student – learn to see the world through other eyes.

Let me provide an example. Sometimes, a song, let's say by rap artist Eminem, that expresses anger, frustration and loneliness can go a long way towards reassuring a young person that their feelings are not only common, but shared, just as a song about suicide can perform a cathartic role in a society that generally panics about any expression of suicidal ideation. Yet, artists like Eminem who, arguably, cultivate their shocking, bad-boy image, are demonised along with their listeners.

In 2001, Federal Member for the Sunshine Coast, Peter Slipper, sought to have Eminem's application for a visa to Australia rejected on the grounds he was an "equal opportunity offender" and the artist was even likened to the offensive Holocaust historian, David Irving (Apter, 15). This attempt to assert control over Eminem, and his audience was an endeavour to create "a false sense of community among a

predominantly middle-aged constituency, by appealing to a shared enemy" (Hitching, 2001: 79) – the shared enemy being young people. This attitude achieves very little except to mobilise and reassert the us/them paradigm, breaking down communication and making the gap between generations unbridgeable.

In interviews, Eminem continues to express surprise and consternation at what he feels is a deliberate blurring of his identity with that of the characters he creates in his music.

> People think they know me from my music, but they don't…. Some of my views that come across in my music aren't the same as in real life. A lot of my personal life is reflected in my music and a lot of it is just to get under people's skin -- and it's worked so far. The kids get me. People in their teens and 20s understand where I'm coming from (Buck, 2001: 23).[3]

Eminem and his music promote moral outrage in the adult culture and prompt media claims of obscenity, homophobia and misogyny. Ironically, his target demographic can relate to and identify with his songs and place his lyrics within a context of ongoing socio-cultural debate about racism, sexism, youth, drugs, fame and identity.

However, it seems that if a young person is to be educated, then her/his education can only occur with a great deal of censorship and the approval of adult culture. In the older generation's eyes, Eminem, as a pedagogical tool of instruction and growth, does not qualify.

You Talkin' to Me?

[3] What Eminem is articulating here is how a lot of young people feel. Just because a teenager listens to death music, an assumption is made about their nature and intentions that are quite reductive and arouse alarm. A person's musical choice is simply an aspect of their nature –not the overarching defining principle.

The way young people are represented and treated is finally more revealing about the adult culture than it is about young people themselves. As Giroux states:

> …it is crucial to remind oneself that any discourse about youth is simultaneously a narrative about the ideologies and social practices that structure adult society (Giroux, 1997:3).

Instead of using popular culture to empower or understand youth, mainstream culture, arm in arm with corporate interests, seeks to commodify and privatize youth for their own ends. As Phillip Adams notes, "marketers exploit a kid's impatience to grow up, ruthlessly accelerating the process, abbreviating the few short years of wonderment" for economic exploitation (1996: 2). Giroux states that, within "the slick world of advertising, teenage bodies are sought after for the exchange value (or profit) generated through the marketing of adolescent sexuality, which offers a marginal exoticism and ample pleasures for the largely male consumer" (28). Contemporary magazines, internet sites, television series, films and music video, abound with sexualized images of young people. [1] Yet, in many instances, young people are willing to become "fodder" for the market and consciously perform the sanctioned versions of "youth".

Last year, pictures of eight-year old Morgan Featherstone caused dismay and outrage among the Australian public as images of her heavily made-up face and pre-pubescent body were shown on magazine covers, newspapers and television. This Lolita-esque depiction is becoming more frequent in mainstream media where a permissible soft-porn (and imaginative hard-core) and the sexualization of the young body become naturalized.[4] Last year, tiny Nikki Webster was voted one of *FHM*

[4] See Karen Brooks, *Courier Mail*, Friday, June 6th, p. 23, 2003.

magazine's 100 most sexy women, despite her tender age of 16. When challenged about the decision, the editor, John Bastick described it as a "bit of fun."

In 2001, riding on the success of her Olympics debut, then 14 year-old Webster released a pop single and accompanying video entitled "Strawberry Kisses". Not only do the lyrics play on Webster's "sexy yearning for a missing boyfriend" (Nolan, 2001: 8), but the film clip features her in a midriff top and tight, hip-hugging pants, gyrating and pouting to an animated and asexual cartoon co-star as well as her audience. Whereas, Webster's co-star may be asexual, she clearly is not – her pre-pubescent body is on display, complete with cowboy hat, prompting some journalists to refer to her as a "mini Madonna" (Whiting, 2001: 41), thus alluding to the sexual provocativeness of her entire ensemble. While Gotham records manager, Ross Fraser, declared that Webster's look was appropriate for her age (Whiting, 2001: 41), journalist Jessica Rudd laments Webster's (and other young stars') precociousness and cites her recent signing to the Jäger make-up line as proof of the loss of youth that marketing forces and peer pressure generate (2001: 11). Rudd writes:

> For 10-year-olds, the modern alternative to the enchanting world of Narnia is literally only a wardrobe away, as simple as sliding on a pair of stilettos, smearing on some foundation and singing songs of exploitative relationships. Suddenly you're transformed into Britney or Claudia or another deliciously naughty taboo (2001: 11)

Thus, the "deliciously naughty taboo" that Nikki Webster, Morgan Featherstone and their peers represent is consciously commodified; sex sells, even when the subject is below the age of legal consent. While Featherstone and Webster may remain charmingly innocent of the desires their images stimulate (Whiting, 2003: 41), they nonetheless continues to arouse them, their mimesis of sexual urges and loss providing

capital for themselves and the market. So much so, that Featherstone's image was recently illegally sold by a German internet company and now adorns the T-shirts of tourists in Europe and South East Asia. When asked how she felt about this, Featherstone's mother expressed consternation that someone else was making money from her daughter's image.

In this corporatized and media age, it is easy to overlook the fact that historically, youthful identities have always been shaped by a range of spheres: family, peers and, increasingly, popular culture. These work in a psychological and social tandem to mould young people and encourage them to engage in a type of cultural relativism whereby their own identities are formed and/or discarded according to current social trends and dominant forms. But are the choices any different for older subjects in a world where the cult of celebrity and the adage "fifteen minutes of fame" are also modes of self-validation?

Young people may willingly consume various images of themselves, but to suggest that the consumption is uncritical, is incorrect; it may be indiscriminate, but young people are more than capable of offering opinions and critiques of the ways in which they are represented. As young filmmaker Daniel Marsden states:

> I think that most people have their heads screwed on properly, even if they're told every night by *A Current Affair* that they don't. They still have a sense of self. But it can't be healthy to have them continually portrayed as "lost youth". (Jackman, 1998: 28)

Conclusion

Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths pure theatre. *Gail Godwin*

Culture is a continually shifting territory where identities are fashioned and refashioned accordingly. Because of their apparent lack of political agency, young people are most often reduced to objects in this process: they are either overprotected and rendered silent while decisions about their future, what is and isn't an appropriate vision or even challenge is made for them. Or, worse, they are commodified and marketed back to themselves, stripped of any history, individual identity and power (Giroux, 1997: 73). The commodification of youth and youth culture presents young people as important only when they are either products or consumers as opposed to critical, social subjects (Giroux, 1997: 73).

In Australia we tend to both burden and divide our young people further by upholding as exemplars of "youth" those who achieve in the sporting arena over and above any other personal, cultural or civic accomplishment, thereby excluding the majority. Athleticism and looks are valued commodities in Australian culture – the forthcoming Olympics again highlighting the emphasis and worth we place on these. They attract attention, money and celebrity status. Educational institutions, perhaps mirroring the larger culture of which they are a part, are complicit in not simply upholding these impossible goals for all young people, but maintaining them as well. Young people and the culture they invest in has much bigger dimensions than those framed by a sporting field.

Internal and external conflict, wars, high unemployment, an educational system in crisis, spiritual beliefs in flux, told they're wonderful by doting parents and families only to discover their nearest and dearest were exaggerating, and an increase of twenty per cent in the number of young people suffering Depression – young people live in a conflictual and contradictory world. As Moe, the barman from *The Simpsons* so astutely notes: "The world has a swishifying effect on young people." Indeed. Is it any wonder that our young people become confused about who they are and where they are going. Yet, despite all these quite negative factors, according to a YouthScan survey, young people remain optimistic about the future:

> In 1992, a YouthScan survey found only 39 per cent of teenagers thought the future was looking food. Ten years later, 86 per cent held this view (Margo, 2004: 20).

That's the beauty of young people. No matter what the adult culture or other young people throw at them, they have an amazing capacity to bounce back, to demonstrate resilience and positivity in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

Whether we create it for them or not, young people will make sure the future is both challenging and positive. They will frame and reframe visions of themselves – some in the moulds we, the adult culture and their educators construct, while others will, thank goodness, break those moulds, shatter those frames and be no less amazing and rewarded for doing so.

I would like to leave the final words to Emma Goldman who once said,

"No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure."

I suggest that in the future we, the educators of this challenging, hateful and wonderful world, all become treasure hunters.

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1. See for example, *Ralph, FHM, Dolly, Cleo, Cosmopolitan, Dawson's Creek, Go! and American Pie*. It is a case of putting old heads on young shoulders, literally and figuratively.