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Comprehending Columbine

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NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1 The data for the descriptions of the attack had been derived from several sources: the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department report (Jefferson County Sheriff's Office 1999), Zoba (2000), and newspaper reportage.

CHAPTER 8

1 The social movements of the 1960s created a cultural revolution that affected all of Western society. Modernism, with its emphasis on the values of production, rationality, scientism, cultural monism, sexual repression, and traditional gender roles was attacked by African Americans, white middle-class youth, feminists, and gays in tandem (Foss and Larkin 1976). After the civil rights phase of the black movement of the 1960s, blacks engaged in a period of nationalism, asserting Afrocentric culture as an alternative to assimilation into white society. White middle-class youth attacked the work ethic, the capitalistic notion that the ultimate goal in life was the accumulation of material goods, the intrinsic value of the status struggle, sexual repression, and the barrier between the personal and political. Feminists challenged traditional gender roles, the patriarchal power structure, and enlarged upon the concept of personal politics originally espoused by white middle-class youth. The women's movement also opened new areas for sexual expression, especially in their defense of lesbianism. Gays also countered traditional gender roles, enlarging the critique of sexual orientation opened up by the women's movement. Within the social movements of the 1960s, cultural revolutionaries saw their efforts at attacking bourgeois modernist culture as acts of liberation whereby those persons excluded from the dominant culture were able to claim space within society on their own terms. By the mid-1970s, the United States was experiencing a dramatic cultural crisis as increasing portions of the old culture were stripped away and the institutions supporting them were losing legitimacy.

President Jimmy Carter felt it incumbent upon himself to declaim the “cultural malaise” (Kennedy 1979; Willis 1999).

2 Postmodern culture is impossible without the intrusion of the electronic media into everyday life. Capitalism, however, has an insatiable ability to appropriate liberated aspects of culture and realienate them by turning them into commodities that are sold for profit in the marketplace. Foss (1972) reported:

[I]t is absolutely amazing how quickly the vocabulary and other superficial features of even the most dissident youth cultures becomes absorbed into the hucksterism of mass culture. “Plymouth is tripping out this year”; “Chevrolet is happening”; Dodge offers a “groovy ride”; while Ford offers a sort of mystical illumination: “You’re feeling uptight/Then you see the Light/Those better ideas from Ford/See the Light/See the Light/See the Light.” (115)

The fundamental purpose of commercial media is to deliver a suitably conditioned audience to an advertiser (Barnouw 1975, 1978). In the final analysis, the only meaningful criterion on which media advertising is evaluated is its ability to generate increased sales. It is insufficient that more people will be exposed to advertising; they must go out and buy the product. Therefore, not only must the advertisement, “create more desire” (Henry 1963), but the programming itself must soften the audience so that it will be susceptible to the advertising pitch. This is done through a variety of means, including product placement; associations with status, sex, and other desires; and technically by juxtaposing shots of longer duration with advertisements containing rapid cuts or changes or alterations in sound volume.

For electronic media outlets, the prime currency is the size of the audience, along with audience demographics (Gitlin 1983). Therefore, outlets compete for audience size and “quality,” with prime audiences being those with the most disposable income. Therefore, in the competition for audiences in ratings, media outlets hype their products. Given the fevered pitch of a myriad of advertisers attempting to harness the attention of populations of potential buyers, postmodern culture becomes increasingly commercialized and directed at generating false consciousness.

The term “false consciousness” is derived from Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, in which the commodity form takes on a symbolic value above and beyond that of its “use value.” Marx (1967) posited that in capitalist society, commodities, in addition to the value generated by their utility, were also given exchange values in the marketplace by virtue of how much money they could demand. Marx regarded money as the ultimate commodity form, the commodity by which all other commodities could be measured. Because human labor is also a commodity that is bought and sold in the marketplace, one aspect of false consciousness is the treatment of a living human subject as nothing more than a source of labor. Thus, we are given the notion of factory “hands” in reference to the labor force.

With the extension of capitalist social relations into the manufacture of culture, where increasing numbers of cultural artifacts and services are sold in the marketplace by profit-seekers, the notion of false consciousness takes on new meaning. As Americans spend increasing amounts of their time in the marketplace buying, selling, persuading, and being persuaded to buy products, the commodity form assumes a facticity of its own, giving it a taken-for-granted status. Yet, because of the need to sell, commodities are enhanced with transcendent values, such as power, status, sexuality, love, peace of mind, acceptance, community, and so forth, ad infinitum.

If the nineteenth century was the century of the industrial revolution, the twentieth century witnessed a revolution in communications media. As so many commentators have noted (e.g., Peter Drucker, Daniel Bell, Arthur Toffler), the age of industry has given way to the age of information. Each new medium developed in the twentieth century, with the possible

exception of television—radio, sound recording, moving pictures, computers, and the Internet—was developed for noncommercial purposes but was quickly appropriated by commercial interests. The dramatic expansion of the mass media over the twentieth century has allowed commercial interests unprecedented control over cultural reproduction. For any given product, there are literally thousands of venues that can be used to advertise it.

The expanse of the mass media and their harnessing by commercial interests have led to what Baudrillard has referred to as “hyperreality” (1983). He was referring to a media-constructed reality of simulacra that substitute for unmediated experience. In its consequences, it competes with and shapes lived experience. Because the hyperreal is a constructed reality that emphasizes the unusual, the spectacular, and the consummatory, it always generates expectations that it cannot fulfill. Although the advertising for, say, the Lexus automobile may promise status, power, and sexual fulfillment, the actual purchase of the car does not automatically grant any of those. That is why irony is a classically postmodern attitude. The postmodern individual understands that the hyperreal emphasizes the hype over the real and is in on the joke. Therefore, the ironic posture assumes that one understands that hyperreality has the same relationship to reality as “weapons of mass destruction” has to the invasion of Iraq. Postmodern culture, with its emphasis on the hyperreal, the intentional generation of false consciousness, and the worship of the commodity form, combines them all in the persona of the celebrity, which is simultaneously everything and nothing. It is nothing because it is a cipher into which desires, mythologies, and public relations are used to craft an identity. It is everything because it embodies the society-wide desire for fame and recognition.

3 A check of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* indicated that between 1984 and 1989, fifty-five articles were published on bullying, between 1990 and 1994, 119 articles, between 1995 and 1999, 372 articles, and between 2000 and 2005, 499 articles. A similar pattern is revealed in the ERIC files, which lists journals and research reports in education, where just three articles were published prior to 1986, seventeen between 1986 and 1990, forty-six between 1991 and 1995, 254 between 1995 and 2000, and 229 after 2000. One would expect that awareness of a social problem would appear first in the popular literature, followed by the professional literature.

CHAPTER 9

1 It is important to point out that the students whom I interviewed tended not to moralize about partying, taking drugs, having sex, or drinking alcohol. What upset them was that evangelical students would take moral positions against such behaviors while engaging in them themselves.

2 The “emergent norm” theory was first introduced by Ralph Turner and Lewis M. Kilian (1957) as an explanation of social contagion. That is, when people see other people engaging in deviant activities that do not result in negative sanctions, they are more likely to engage in such behavior. The theory also underpins James Q. Wilson’s (1982) “broken window” theory of crime contagion in a community. He noted that when somebody throws a rock through the window of an abandoned building and it remains broken, it is merely a matter of time until all the windows in the building are broken. This presents a visible indicator of social decay and the loss of the community’s ability to enforce norms of decorous behavior.

