

not of course true. The editor showed no such concern – to me, at least.

I then sent the poem to the literary editor of the *Independent*, saying I hadn't sent it to him in the first place because I did not think the *Independent* would publish it. But now that everybody had turned it down, the *London Review of Books*, the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, perhaps I was wrong about the *Independent*! To cut a long story very short, the literary editor wanted to publish it but he felt he had to show it to the editor. The editor sat on it for a few days and then made no comment except to say the *Independent* was not going to publish the poem. And I've never had any explanation. Nothing. It was simply, No.

The *London Review of Books*' letter was dated 24 September 1991; the *Guardian*'s rejection came in a conversation on the telephone at the beginning of October. The letter from the editor of the *Observer* was dated 6 November, and that from the *Independent* was dated 9 December.

In conversation earlier, you said you would rather not write down the record of this poem yourself, because it would sound as if you were whingeing. But there is an issue here beyond the complaint of the rejected poet. This poem has been dropped by the mainstream press, which would normally have snapped up anything written by Harold Pinter.

I did incidentally, send it to the *New York Review of Books*, just as a laugh. The editor thanked me warmly for sending the poem, but said he was afraid they couldn't use it. So I finally did not waste any more time. I heard that a magazine called *Bomb*, a very well-produced publication in the West Village, might be interested, and indeed they published the poem.

It was also finally published in Britain, in January 1992, by a new newspaper called *Socialist*, with a limited circulation. But as far as national newspapers go, in Holland it was published in one of the main Dutch dailies, *Handelsblad* – in no uncertain terms, too, with an article about the rejection in England, written by the editor. And it was published in Bulgaria, Greece and Finland.

It is interesting, isn't it? At a time when papers are not too troubled about the severity of the language, when it is about the body, scatological, sexual, or whatever. We have overcome the years when you had to put a series of dots in place of an 'F' word. Yet the objection to your poem was justified in your use of some strong words.

This may be because it is a formed piece of work, and perhaps that is where its strength lies. It is a deliberate piece of work. So it alarms more. I'd like to say, as the poet, that I regard it as a very ugly poem. It is necessarily ugly. Its reference is to the grossest ugliness.

But nobody ever said, 'We don't think this poem is good enough. It is not a successful piece of work.' Nobody has actually said that.

I feel particularly sensitive about the language. I am the editor of Index on Censorship responsible for losing Index an annual grant of £7,000. Somebody objected to the word 'cunt' in an article in our special issue on women, *Breaking the Silence* (9/1990). I thought the word, though strong, was in context. However, although I do not know the exact details, one funding organisations obviously took exception.

I wonder what would happen if your poem were to be re-submitted now, as an exercise. People and editors change. Perhaps it would be an exercise worth pursuing ... The reactions seem to be final for the wrong reasons: 'family paper', or 'offending readers' ...

Oh no. I have no intention of re-submitting it – or anything else – to any of these newspapers. Unless I decide to write nursery rhymes.

At a time when we have become far more accustomed to strong language in print, it is almost amusing to find sensitivities expressed in this way. Perhaps it reflects this very peculiar political period we are living in. There is a rather coy and false reaction to matters and events, which are 'strong' in themselves. Brutal language is shunned as a way of avoiding brutal issues.

I think that is a valid conclusion to be drawn. It was well known and has been often asserted that the sanitisation of the Gulf War was palpable. The actual nature of the horror was hardly ever aired, or seen on TV. Such a thing as this poem, for me, is about opening a curtain which many people would prefer to see remain closed. And it is in the interests of government that the curtain, that veil, is forever drawn over the nature of reality.

Every war has its share of blood and dripping guts, and bodies blown to pieces, but barring one photo published by the *Observer*, as it happens, of a carbonised figure above a tank, this war had no dripping guts.

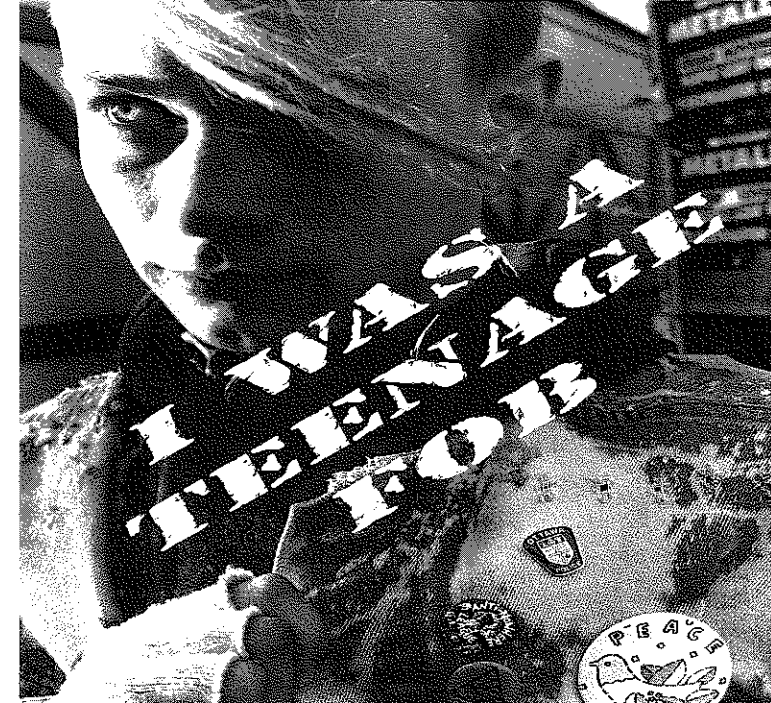
None of it then, and none of it wanted as a reminder now. You can trace the history of the present state of affairs to a series of events through the 1980s, which I am quite clear about. I'm talking of the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, the 'low intensity' war against Nicaragua, the invasion of Panama in 1989, followed by the Gulf War. I do believe this is what I represent in the last line of the poem: 'Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.' It refers to who is the boss, who is in charge, who is the master.

But the behaviour of the media is crucial in all this. It has been confirmed that the number of deaths in Panama approached 4,000. But at the time the media talked in hundreds.

Do you remember the revolution in Romania in 1989? The TV was full of statements saying 80,000 people had been killed, especially around Timisoara. The true figure, as I understand it, is about 1,000.

So we are really talking about a controlled media. What the Western media actually does is blow up or exaggerate certain facts in its own interests – or in its government's interests – and ignore and suppress other facts. The dead in Iraq and the continuing deaths in Iraq are hardly front page news.

This piece has been reprinted courtesy of Index on Censorship (Vol 21 No. 5, May 1992) London, England.



TORONTO TEENAGERS: MAKING CHOICES IN THE 1990s

Exhibition curated by
Grant McCracken
at the Royal Ontario Museum
May 30-September 7, 1992

by Alan O'Connor

Rebel intellectuals turned their attention to youth subcultures in the 1970s as a way of challenging their conservative colleagues in sociology, education and media studies. Many of these investigators and writers had personal affinities with the subcultures they studied. They smoked up, listened to the same music and read the same outsider books. They were more comfortable with thumbed-up copies of Genet than with sociology textbooks.

However, from American sociology came Howard Becker's hip books on outsiders: jazz musicians, dope smokers, and others. Becker paid attention to how the media, the police and the courts could create a moral panic about specific outsiders, turning them into deviants and resulting in harsh prison sentences for relatively minor offences. From England came a series of books by radical sociologists who met at radical conferences aimed at understanding the worlds of groups like British soccer fans who were the subject of sensational reporting in the national press.

The new discipline of Cultural Studies cut its intellectual teeth with a series of studies of studies of British youth scenes: Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, Punks, and others. To criticize such books as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* because they ignore highly politicized youth is in part to miss the point. Hebdige was trying to show that there was an unstated politics in styles of dress, music and

dance. It was not organized resistance to capitalism, racism and sexism but it was resistance through ritualized everyday culture. At a low point in working-class consciousness in Britain, it seemed that the political weakness of the hegemonic system was in reproducing itself. At least some of the youth were visibly opting out.

The *Toronto Teenagers* exhibition, curated by Grant McCracken at the Royal Ontario Museum, is at least indirectly influenced by these intellectual traditions. However, it is also centrally situated in the traditions of material folklore and anthropology. The idea here is to attempt to uncover the cultural meaning of styles of clothing and material artifacts. The first section of the exhibition presents male and female clothing typical of teenagers from the 1930s to the 1980s. Even though these displays resemble those of department store windows, they do have an intrinsic interest for today's teenagers. Video screens play brief extracts from interviews which explain the cultural significance of the changing styles.

Very much in the British tradition of Cultural Studies, the second part of the exhibition gives space to five subcultures: Preppies, Hippies, Punks, B-Boys and B- Girls, and Rockers. Here the focus on material artifacts becomes a real

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limitation. The music of each group plays in the background but even that cannot bring frozen models to life. The video-taped interviews become very important in the section. McCracken and his team gathered some interesting and rich ethnographic material from interviews with 120 teenagers in the downtown Toronto area. But they seem somewhat uncertain about what to do with it. The project of bringing the material artifacts to life begins to seem somewhat lame. If the Royal Ontario Museum is serious about continuing with studies of contemporary Canadian culture, it will need to free its investigators from the ordinary purpose of the museum--to collect and store objects--and allow them more intellectual and creative freedom.

The study of youth subcultures in Britain was developed at a small graduate research centre at the University of Birmingham. Related concerns were developed at the same time by other radical intellectuals as either individual or collective projects. Among these were Jeffrey Week's historical research on homosexuality, journals such as *Feminist Review* and *Race and Class*, and also Marxist studies of the mass media. These concerns were woven into Cultural Studies, sometimes implicitly and other times as explicit challenges.

From the early 1970s the modern lesbian and gay movement developed its own specific intellectuals, journalists and artists, usually outside the university system. It took an inspired guess to realize that Howard Becker was gay. Hebdige wrote a book that today we'd call "queer." But in the late 1970s and early 1980s we didn't have that word and I never expected to find Hebdige's book on subcultures in a lesbian/gay bookstore. There was evidently a kind of block. A highly developed school of writing on subcultures and style apparently had nothing at all to say about the most damned obvious historical and contemporary subculture: that of lesbians and gay men.

The third section of *Toronto Teenagers* is devoted to the problems and concerns most often voiced by the youth interviewed. These are as follows: the environment, family relations, racism, multiculturalism, sexism, dating and their own futures. The difficulty in this section is that complex problems can neither be properly described nor analysed in television-style soundbites. The presentation is cautious. The section on dating is a timid exploration of teenage sexual activity but it does at least touch on the issue of safer sex. The section on racism says nothing about police shootings of Black men and women. Most tellingly, the complex and diverse lives of lesbian and gay youth are completely silenced.

Among the most interesting moments of the exhibition are segments of the displays on youth subcultures. The video clips present for each subculture testimonies about the transition of youth from one style to

another. One white boy used to be a Preppy but now he's a B-Boy--and for the first time hangs out with Black friends. A punk woman tells about the necessary steps to becoming accepted as a punk. This sense of emergence is important--vital for the queer youth who are not present here.

The experience of immigration is important for many Canadian young people. Their peers can be merciless about kids who are "fresh off the boat" and try to fit in but get it all wrong (acid-washed jeans). Children born of immigrant parents have well-known problems with the conflicting demands of two worlds: that of their parent culture and that of school. Styles and images cross borders too. Black leather jackets, shaved heads and Doc Martins have crossed and recrossed the Atlantic. What does it mean to be a skinhead in Canada? In crossing the Atlantic do subcultural styles lose meaning and gain other meanings? Are they often simply fashions? A serious investigation of subcultures in Canada will have to address such issues.

Another serious issue to investigate is hostility, racism and conflict between youth groupings and cultures. In the *Toronto Teenagers* exhibition these issues are there very briefly in soundbites about parents and about racism. But overall the show presents a rather cheerful perspective on life: unemployment, homophobia, police beatings don't exist. The power of adults over teenagers is glossed over. Is life ever boring, ordinary or just weird? We brought two small children with us and they spent the afternoon at the Royal Ontario Museum fascinated by the prehistoric animal skeletons.

Alan O'Connor teaches cultural studies at Trent University. He thanks Mariam Durrani, Andrew Kim and Albert Kim of the youth caucus at CKLN 88.1 FM for their critical observations on the exhibition.

Q ALAN O'CONNOR: I'm speaking with Grant McCracken of the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum and curator of the exhibition on *Toronto Teenagers: Making Choices* in the 1990s. Could you start by saying something about what you set out to do with this show?

A GRANT McCracken: We wanted the first exhibition of the Institute for Contemporary Culture to bring within the museum materials that are not normally within the walls of this institution. To

give people a chance to glimpse as systematically as possible an aspect of the world to which they would not otherwise have access. Our assumption was that if you are over twenty-five the world of adolescence is pretty inaccessible to you. And finally we were concerned to let teenagers tell their own stories. The museum as an institution has been quite rightly criticized for presuming to tell other peoples' stories. We wanted young people as much as possible to speak for themselves.

Q How was the research for the show done?

A We set up a 8-high video camera around town: Queen Street, the Eaton Centre, drop-in centres, high schools. We set up the camera in nooks and crannies in the city where we could catch young people as they passed by and interviewed them on camera.

Q The first part of the exhibition shows the changing fashions of teenagers from the 1930s to the 1980s. For each decade you have a window that is rather like those of a department store. Why did you decide to present the lives of teenagers through displays of clothes?

A Our focus was on the materiality of culture. Material objects are especially important in a culture like our own. Once you've said something about the symbolism of an object you've said something about the world from which that object comes. One of the purposes of the show was to create archives that people can visit in a hundred years from now to glimpse the last decade of the twentieth century. What we wanted to do was to capture the objects. That is after all the traditional focus of the museum and of the Royal Ontario Museum in particular. We wanted the viewer to look at the objects, but through them to glimpse something of the world from which those objects came.

Q The second part of the show selects five subcultures for attention.

A What are the major subcultures in Toronto today?

A That's a very difficult question to answer and it was hotly debated within the museum. When we made our proposal for the exhibition there was some concern that we were just talking to marginal groups of teenagers. We had a group of eight teenagers who were our advisory committee throughout. They told us that B-Boys and B-Girls

were fifty percent of some high schools, rockers were about ten percent, hippies about fifteen percent but growing, preppies were sometimes thirty percent but dropping in numbers.

Q The last part of the exhibition is about problems and concerns that most affect young people. What were their major concerns?

A The topics of that section are environment, racism, multiculturalism, sexism, family, the future. These came from open-ended questions. We simply asked the 120 teenagers to identify their major concerns.

Q How would you respond to the criticism that the lives of lesbian and gay youth are silenced by this exhibition?

A It is certainly true that some of the teenagers we talked with are gay. That has to be the case. They don't identify themselves as being gay and that's a kind of problem. So the show certainly fails to tell their stories. The show fails to tell the stories of a lot of groups. There seem to be as many fifteen clearly defined subcultures in as many high schools. We had room only to show five. There were limitations on what we could do. But I absolutely agree with the criticism. This is one of the faults of the show.

Q Even though your intention was to allow young people to speak for themselves, clearly you and your team shaped the exhibition. What was your theoretical framework, your political framework, for shaping the exhibition in the way that you did?



Photos: Laena Wertberger



A Our theoretical framework comes from a school of anthropology

that undertakes ethnography from the point of view of the material culture of the culture in question. The notion here is that material culture carries and creates and organizes various kinds of cultural meanings. More particularly we understood that the world of adolescence is now an extraordinarily rich and varied world. This was not the case even three decades ago. A woman who was a teenager in the 1950s told us that then you had only two choices: you could be mainstream or James Dean. Now there are as many as fifteen possibilities. There is a kind of archaeological accumulation of possibilities. There are new stylistic innovations that take place. Instead of fading, the older ones continue to exist as possibilities. We wanted to look at this world of choice. Teenagers are called upon to make a selection from this world. These choices made as stylistic decisions have profound ideological and political implications. This is not just wacky dressing up. The choices that people make from the envelope of stylistic possibilities reflect an ideological position and that is what we wanted the show to present: the cultural, the ideological, the social and political meanings with which each of these stylistic categories is charged.

Comments by

MARIAM DURRANI, ANDREW KIM
AND
ALBERT KIM OF THE
CLASSROOM STRUGGLE ON
CKLN 88.1 FM.

"It was refreshing to see that the introductory video was done by a person of colour. I thought that was pretty cool, the first thing we saw. And a female too."

"And I also enjoyed the exhibition of clothing styles and people reminiscing about their youth from 1930 to 1980. We really liked that part because it made us aware of how styles come back, even though it's different now."

"When we got into the present we didn't like the

way that teenagers were put into specific little boxes: preppies, hippies, b-boys and b-girls.

And you really only focused only on downtown schools. And there's a

certain way in which lesbian and gay youth dress and you really didn't cover that."

"When we went through the exhibit we thought that this is a white-washed exhibit. It seemed centred towards parents."

"I know about the b-boys and the b-girls that in the things they wear there is a political statement they're trying to make. And some groups really hate each other. You should have brought out the emotions of youth, the raw emotions of wanting to belong and not wanting to belong."

"The section on racism, sexism, environment and so on should have been much more specific. That's what kids want to talk about. When we went into racism we didn't talk about the police and tension between coloured youth and the police. When we went into sexism it was like you just asked what's your opinion about sexism and they just rambled on. They are big issues. You should have broken them down: there's not just dating, there's inter-racial dating, homosexual dating, parents' input into your dating, who you date, age-ism. The topics are way too broad to make any sense to us whatsoever."

"What's the use of telling the adults what they already know. Tell them what they don't know."

"Youth have much more to say. We wish you had asked questions that challenged the kids and made them think. It seems a bit too empty. The issues are way too sugar-coated. If this is supposed to be about us then we get the feeling that it's not us. You should have brought in issues: the Gulf War, what do you think about that? The feminist movement, what do you think about that? You could have asked them about all these things. If my parents came in there they would not see the reality of what students are thinking now."

"As a student I want to talk about the youth that are trying to fight racism and sexism in their high schools. And about their families, how they limit you."

"The youth that were interviewed were the ones who think of themselves as the popular ones. The youth who don't think of themselves as being popular weren't interviewed."

IMPRESSIONS OF AFRICA



BY STAN FOGEL

At

the Egypt Air office in Cairo where I went to purchase my Cairo-Nairobi, Kenya ticket I was greeted by a dazzling Cairene. She made me forget Cairo's monumental traffic jams, its obsessive beggars, its monuments ringed by tour buses. Instead of baksheesh, a handout, I would have handed out myself...as ransom. In the dense dark souk or market, which travel books invariably describe as colourful, I would have shopped for her; on buses where one belch produces a ripple that, in their crowded confines, registers on the Richter scale I would have ridden to the movies. The movies, themselves, make Bruce Lee kung-fu films seem like they were done by Bergman, but I would have watched them avidly.

All this I told her, but nothing, surprisingly, wooed her as much as the succinct statement of my profession: "Professor of Literature." I do not know whether there are entomologists out there who make "them" swoon merely by muttering "Bugs," but periodically the love of literature, long since forgotten by a jaded academic who says it for his supper, erupts in his presence. Such was the case here. Despite the line expanding behind me, which no doubt joined the one winding around the Sphinx and/or the pyramids, crowds being a Cairene's constant companion, the Egypt Air clerk told me at length her own lofty goals. She was a student of English literature in Cairo who worked part-time in the airline office. Her love was Jane Austen. And Egypt's authors? As easily as if she could blow the city's

