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Children of the Korn towards a new postwar generation

by Alejandro Espinoza

*I would like to salute
the ashes of American flags
and all the falling leaves
filling up shopping bags*

Wilco, *Ashes of American flags*

I used to be in love with billboards. These enigmatic and sometimes shocking displays of secret desires have blasted on the windshields of a stupefied America for a long time now. I've always considered them to be a crucial invention, a necessity for the modern visual world. They raised the emotional prowess of the city, each banner a crass response from its suburban entrails.

Sometimes I wonder what's going to happen to them once the war is over.

Let's say that war is *imminent*, a powerful word used by the powerful to submit people to notions of destiny, history and the religious road towards a given End. Once this war actually ends, we might ask ourselves: What elements of the past are going to be held by the generation that will respond – philosophically, artistically, politically – to its end result? Is it going to be the same response as the previous postwar generation? What do these children have in their surrounding reality that might enable them to stake their claim in the annals of history, be it as a force of opposition towards war, or maybe as part of a social dynamic that is going to render the traditional concept of war obsolete? How would they react to war, and how would they “go on with their lives” once war is over?

Too many questions for such an adulterated, attention-deficit-disordered generation. I asked a student of mine, not too long ago, if she could remember the last war the U.S. has held against another country. She said WWII.

I bet some of the kids from her generation bought those Saddam Hussein T-shirts they sold at the local *Hot topic*-like store. That was a cheap shot. My intention is not to criticize the young people of today; but to a certain degree, those kinds of responses to historical questions, that kind of perception directed at the people they see in the media – they represent the essential manifestation of

discontent that these new generations are going to take forth once they are immersed in the reality of a world war.

Because I really do believe we're about to enter a long, harsh and confusing war. And I also believe that young people won't react the same as previous post-war generations. But I also believe that society needs a conduit through which ideas must flow, converge and present themselves, in the form of poetry, art, fiction, or any artistic endeavor, for the purpose of representing the general state of mind of a society's fears and desires. It is a crucial part of life. How will these kids do it?

These children are part of the generational boom that came in the eighties. They are a byproduct of planned parenthood and dysfunctionality, with an assimilated idea of the television as surrogate mother (even more so than the bitter, neurotic and also confused generation born in the 70's; that is, my generation). They have inherited an enormous amount of visual history – experiencing historical events mainly through images, not through narrative discourses – and have been in the middle of a sort of dialectics of history, reviewing, revising, reducing, negating and approving history and its ever-changing certainties. Even though they are not “aware” of history in the traditional sense (facts, dates, figures, circumstances rounded up and charted, as well as a good, solid understanding of outcomes, consequences and future resolutions), we have to consider that they probably live in the most history-obsessed era ever.

They have experienced economical strife as well as growth, sometimes without really knowing which is prevailing at any given time. They are just as accustomed to satisfying their every need as they are to wondering why they can't get enough. I wouldn't be surprised if they were prone to stealing without thinking twice. Their world offers them so much stuff, at some point they might as well just grab whatever they can. It's theirs, that's what the world tells them anyway. Advertising orders them to think for themselves. Think about that.

By the time I turn 70, these kids will run the show, will hold the reins of society. I'll be part of one of the largest generations of old people ever to be trudging along the pathways of this increasingly confusing world. What will be *their* take on us, how will they use the canvas of reality to convey their ideas, their everyday frustrations, their resolution towards a civilization that doesn't seem

to understand from history, that has even placed the necessary ideological and informational implements so as to make people forget the implications of war?

And today, how are young people, the ones who are against war, going to manifest their opposition? Are they going to take the same cues from their immediate past – that is, the peace demonstrations of the 60's? Is there anything they will try to change in order for them not to be a simple repetition of a (somehow) failed enterprise? (hippies of the world, I apologize). What remains, though, are two variables: an inert and conflicting society, alongside the need for people to manifest their discontent.

Right now, people are on the streets, having their say, picketing in front of the curtained windows of government buildings. We can see the interconnection of reality through the images that the media spoon feeds the masses, the anonymous faces of people in France, Spain, Mexico City, Los Angeles, San Diego, New York, Buenos Aires and on the border between the U.S. and Mexico. There is a hyperawareness about the current situation, an information overload that has spawned the fictionalization of war (check the Hollywood-scripted State of the Union speech that W. just gave to the world, as well as the movie-like scenario presented by Colin Powell in his search to unveil the secret weapons of our alien enemies), but also the first social upheaval that tries to stop a war *before* it begins. Maybe young kids today are a little bit fed up with the traditional discourse of complaint; they have stopped to smell the roses of conspiracy theories and have begun to ask themselves “O.K., but, what can we do?”

I have a student whose overtly enthusiastic need to start the habit of reading has led him to a state of inertia. Doesn't know where to begin, doesn't know where it ends. All he has is a Paypal card and an Amazon account. The rest he needs to find out through the traditional channels, mainly by studying literature, philosophy, social sciences. But therein lies the problem. Those “traditional channels” have offered him none of the security to begin his intellectual project. The passion is there, like I said, but the tools are somehow unavailable. He's sixteen years old. If you take the intention to read and exchange it for, say, his need to declare himself against this war, I think we would run into the same equation: no security in the traditional channels, the tools are unavailable.

Another student surprised me with one of those sloganeering thoughts that are common among teenagers today (was I such a sloganeering teenager in my past? I don't remember). He said “Patriotism is poison.” No further ideas as I tried to make him explain what he meant by that. There is an intuitive response to things that sound

true to them, so there is no further need for explanation. It's like placing yourself in front of

Picasso's Guernica and saying “I like it,” and when they ask you to explain why, you say, “I don't know. I just do.”

We've reached a point in which the cynicism of those born in the 70's no longer works for these kids; irony has been surpassed and replaced by a desire to continue a struggle, based on the premise that they simply cannot see themselves satisfied – spiritually, economically, socially, morally – in the near future. Theirs is a post-ironic generation raised on a steady diet of meaningless and juxtaposed messages of violence and righteousness, of oxymorons such as repressed sexual liberation, living in a world best exemplified by the image of a kid who sells gum and newspapers on the streets of Mexicali, while carrying a cell phone and listening to Eminem and Korn on his brand-new-stolen Sony CD player. This kid is no longer Oliver Twist.

What will happen when slogan declarations no longer work for them? Will billboards serve as mega notepads, will they scribble their sentiments beyond a simple graffiti? Will these scribblings respect the traditional rules of grammar and syntax, and are we willing to accept their new syntactic forms?

There's a lot more to this. Let's discuss what happens.

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Zazil2 prints field reports on art, education, and poetic activity in the greater Cali-Baja area. The editors seek short essays, articles, reviews, and opinion pieces from students, teachers, and concerned citizens. Please address all correspondence to zazil2@factoryschool.org. Free copies of this and other issues of Zazil2 are available in PDF format on the website [factoryschool.org/zazil] as well as by contacting the editors.

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