

STRIKE THREE

The Editors

That's one strike. This is the second strike. I'm going to tell you, the Board of Regents one of these days is going to give you three strikes and out. Somebody is going to get fired around this university if they don't follow the rules.

—Marvin Pomerantz
President, Board of Regents

One of the things cultural studies purports to be about is the rules: who makes them, what meanings they convey, which identities they legitimate, whose power they serve. Cultural studies is concerned with the relationship between signs, images, meanings, and narratives on the one hand, and social and political struggle on the other. It takes as axiomatic that truth and beauty are not universals but historically and geographically specific constructs. Aesthetics are not transcendent; aesthetics are a regime. Moreover, cultural studies recognizes that cultural meanings are produced in and through institutional frameworks. Against the modernist notion that specially trained readers are able to discern the manifest and latent content of "works," cultural studies insists that aesthetic texts are assigned significance in the overlapping networks of dissemination, consumption, intelligibility, and power. Text indissolubly becomes context.

The Pre-Text

Recent events at the University of Iowa have forced us to think about this at the level of the practice of everyday life within our own

institutional context. In February, in an introductory art class taught by a teaching assistant, guest artist Frank Evans presented his videos, one of which showed a few seconds of what in the next week's newspapers would dispassionately be called "scenes of a homosexual act between two men." Offended by the images, a student in the class phoned her mother in Des Moines, who subsequently complained to the university administration. Following the highly publicized complaint, various levels of the UI administration mobilized for damage control, circulating memos, calling for procedural investigation, and above all, making use of the local media to frame and contain the issue. The responses to the event—both critical and supportive—were nothing if not revealing, insofar as they brought into play a number of pre-existing agenda and served to demonstrate the limits of acceptable discourse within a state-funded and controlled institution.

In the first place, the event shows the complex maneuvering required to advocate censorship in the era of "cultural diversity." In order to legitimize the censoring of a representation of what is now considered to be an "alternative lifestyle," the suggestion that the student's objection stemmed from homophobia was vociferously denied. Yet in every public pronouncement, "gay male sex" was the spectre invoked in order to be immediately banished. *Daily Iowan* headlines blared "homosexual video" and "gay video," while the highlighted quote from a February 9 article has the student testifying, "I watched the film of two men having oral sex." Fragmented, almost illicit, descriptions of the scene in question were circulated; finally the gayness of Evans' video was foregrounded when it was repeatedly associated with a similarly controversial showing last semester of *Taxi zum Klo*—the "first strike" in Pomerantz's diatribe. Thus, although the controversy was said to be "not about homosexuality," its framing solicited and played upon existent homophobia in the community.

Yet in the age of cultural diversity, subtler strategies are required to justify excluding homosexuality from the multicultural smorgasbord. In order to avoid the appearance of bigotry, an issue that in the past would have been clearly defined as "moral" must be reformulated. In this case, the new litmus test for both this video presentation and the screening of *Taxi zum Klo* by the German Department became educational validity. The question is not moral or political, but simply pedagogical: can the teacher defend her motive for showing (homo-)sexually explicit material in a required course? Two weeks after the incident, the Acting Dean of the College of Liberal Arts sent a cautionary memo to graduate instructors and professors, warning us to be "sensitive" to students' values while reminding us that the burden of proof rests on the instructor. Meanwhile, the media coverage of student reaction was limited to a fairly

ludicrous debate over the distinction between art and pornography. The opinions of gay students were neither considered nor reported.

The real and denied issue is which groups are legitimated in our society: who gets to speak and who is silenced. In the debate over classroom practices, what does not seem debatable is why some materials are singled out as "sensitive" while others routinely pass unnoticed. Not long after this incident, an American Studies TA was semi-privately chastised for screening *Paris is Burning*, a movie with no explicit sex, but with gay content. Homosexuality is being constructed as eminently censorable, yet the insistence on pedagogical ethics as the central issue belies what is at stake: the freedom to articulate a pro-homosexual discourse in a public context. Even many persons who publicly defended the video did so in the terms set out for them by the forces of censorship. They argued that the video was not pornographic, that in fact it had artistic merit, and was an integral part of the artist's work. Rather than uncategorically defend the right to show diverse, controversial material, they were made to demonstrate their commitment to "academic freedom" by admitting and thus legitimizing the claims of homophobes both in and (more threateningly) outside the classroom. The defenders of the video ironically became apologists, even as the laudatory rhetoric of "diversity" collapsed at the sight—brief though it was, anonymous and decontextualized in all of the news articles about it—of two men fucking.

The Big Squeeze

This enforcement of proper cultural output at the University of Iowa reflects a national move to rule out the "improper." Pomerantz's umpiring demonstrates the coercion that lies behind a more familiar call to orthodoxy. Since the late 1980s, the academy has been caught in a defensive position struggling to disavow the epithet of "politically correct" thrown by, among others, the right-wing thought police. The accusation of PC serves to shut down debate, dissent, and any demystification of our social system.

The "controversy" is represented differently to two different audiences. A politically conservative state-wide audience is primed to find it repulsive, and to react in unapologetically homophobic terms. The second audience, well represented by the Iowa City community, which rejects homophobia baldly stated, is encouraged to view the controversy as one concerning incorrect personal conduct and pedagogical error—a lack of judgment and respect. The latter response generally informs that strategy of silencing, the PC epithet. For example, sexism can be defended by accusing the person who objects of being extremist, overly emotional, self-righteous, perverse,

and even dishonest. Political issues and radical critique are sidelined. The dissenting individual is ultimately isolated and delimited as unrealistic, abnormal, and un-ruly, someone whose argument is beside the point because the point is his or her demeanor. It all becomes an issue of conduct, image or pose, abstract individual rights, and personnel management. A new low-intensity McCarthyism.

Obviously there is no lack of overt political bashing by the right wing. But the McCarthyism busily doing business at present is not only Authority wielding the baseball bat. Divide and conquer has been given a new twist. The Right in the U.S. has effectively divided its forces in order to conquer. In what could be termed the Big Squeeze, the right-wing claims to be both the moral majority and the endangered minority. This strategy allows conservatives to inhabit the margins and falsely pose as an oppressed group in order to lend credence to their arguments. They have almost succeeded in appropriating the languages of the Civil Rights movement, of oppressed minorities, and of the avant garde. Reactionaries pose as brave non-conformists and freedom fighters waging a battle against "male bashing," "reverse racism," and "feminazis" (not to mention Pat Robertson's witches). In short, a reversal of positions is effected: those who are oppressed become the oppressors. At the same time, however, reactionaries in the government, media, or university use their power to control the production of knowledge, to frame the issues, and ultimately to fire people.

The Big Freeze

At the local level, on the ground, as it were, the Big Squeeze gives us the Big Freeze. By far the majority of classroom instructors at this university are teaching assistants and untenured faculty members. The notion that tenured radicals have taken over the Humanities and are preparing a coup d'etat in the Social Sciences is a right-wing myth. We are underpaid, overworked, and dangerously vulnerable to intimidation and threats. We do not control the agenda; we are under surveillance. The University Administration's recent ambivalence concerning our academic freedom has generated a clear feeling of "controversy paranoia" among graduate instructors. If we accept—and we do not—that it is our job to somehow protect our young charges from controversy, how can we pretend to speak at all? The uninterrogated term is "controversial" itself. It is relational; a situation can only be a controversy from a given perspective. Insofar as conservatives have been able to control the definition of "controversial" and thereby accuse their opponents of pushing an agenda, they succeed in naturalizing their own political program. When the dean or department chair circulates a memo requiring instructors to excuse

their students from controversial materials, s/he is enforcing the dominant set of values since it is the only set with the available power to enforce its version of "controversial." Instructors must think twice before broaching issues sensitive to the Right. Self-censorship is often the safest avenue, for we know that ours are the only jobs truly at stake.

The Commitment to Undergraduate Education

Inseparable from the controversy over the Evans video is the current debate over the value (monetary connotation intended) of undergraduate education. By placing a premium on research, the argument goes, the university has created a situation in which the bulk of teaching is being done by graduate instructors rather than professors, thus undermining the worth of the four-year education. While justified on the surface, it is important to note how in many instances, instructor incompetence becomes a blanket excuse for student intolerance. Not only are liberal arts instructors attacked for supposedly imposing radical, pro-gay, feminist agenda on their (presumed to be straight, white, conservative) students, but increasingly, the alleged linguistic deficiencies of foreign-born TAs (most recently in the Mathematics Department) are being blamed for students' problems. Xenophobia is translated as consumer dissatisfaction.

All of this attention to allegedly substandard teaching practices is intended to benefit the undergraduates, yet the students being constructed in the rhetoric of these allegations are the opposite of the well-rounded critical thinkers the university claims to want to produce. Parochial and fragile, they are both unable to understand accented English and vulnerable to assault by alien values. They are dependent and voiceless, therefore unable to engage in minimal dialogue with (let alone question) their instructors. Rather than being empowered, they are infantilized by the charges of teaching malpractice. They are encouraged to complain to mom and dad when their sensibilities are offended instead of engaging in the kind of intellectual exchange and debate that, on an abstract level, is always deemed to be appropriate in an institution charged with the education of vocal, empowered citizens.

While many of us have experienced the sense of powerlessness that makes the critique of the current educational hierarchy seem compelling, we need to maintain a constant vigilance about how power is distributed in the university. Student disempowerment does not result from the actions of TAs, whose own positions are precarious, but is produced by the coercive ideologies that profess to support and protect the (idealized) students and their privileged values. The focus on students' rights becomes a marketing strategy that doubles

back on the student who accuses an instructor of ideological coercion, thus creating a pre-text for the intervention of the parents and ultimately the state. Assuming that her complaint was spontaneous and sincere (i.e. not the feigned outrage of the right wing student organizations that utilize protest rhetoric to advance their own hegemonic agenda), her agency in the debate is in fact appropriated and marginalized.

The non-ideal students, who are gay, lesbian, minority, foreign, leftist and feminist, are already marginalized by the fact that their sensibilities are never represented as in danger of being offended in the first place; discourses that contradict their worldviews are par for the course, and their silence is expected. Ironically, while "critical thinking" becomes a requirement increasingly institutionalized in many curricula, the message that has been circulated here is that to silence and punish those who offend you is the desirable goal of "critique."

In this case, the empowerment of the student is really the empowerment of the parent as consumer, who holds increasing sway over the product s/he buys. In difficult economic times, this product is nothing more than access to future financial success. The package must be ideologically safe, tamper resistant; just as the end product—for the students too are commodified—must be mechanistically competent, fit for service in an increasingly fragile yet coercive economic and political system. Censorship is facilitated by the fact that certain ideas are already outside the narrowly defined realm of what is useful and desirable knowledge; the economy of diminishing returns provides a ready excuse for ideological closure.

Out

The University claims to be a place of exploration, challenge, and debate where dominant value systems are interrogated, subordinate ones are given the freedom to be heard, and all involved not only respect the differences of others but display a healthy curiosity about them. At the end of the day, learning is what it's all about. What these events demonstrate is precisely the opposite: minority viewpoints are met either with a barely disguised hostility or the slightly more sophisticated derision of the PC-baiters. Fortunately, in spite of a climate in which "academic freedom" and "student rights" become the ruses of censorship, outspoken minority voices with their own organizations and institutions continue to challenge this illiberal regime of intolerance. Classroom instructors cannot collude in the forced disappearance of oppositional cultural representations; we must provide space for the airing of dissident viewpoints. We need to recognize that

a university ought to be about inclusion and critique, not exclusion and conformity. To “follow the rules,” as Marvin Pomerantz et al. politely suggest (baseball bat in hand), would reduce cultural critique to the babble of puppets.