SCHOOL CHILDREN IN THE XXI CENTURY: THINKING ABOUT A POST-MODERN CHILDHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This article presents part of researches that we have carried out into the connections between school and contemporary culture. We have attempted to show, interpret, and problematize ways of being poor children in public schools located in the outskirts of a Brazilian capital. This study is inscribed in an intelligibility matrix that both considers childhood as a cultural, social, historical construction that is subject to changes, and regards contemporaneity as marked by conditions intertwined in what has been widely known as post-modern culture. We have considered that this culture state, with incisive implications of media and consumption, has produced peculiar kinds of child subjects, in accordance with cultural

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configurations of the contemporary world. Visibility, ephemerality, ambivalence, disposability, and superficiality are part of those children's lives. These children have relentlessly sought fruition and pleasure; they have tried to participate in the globally acknowledged culture. They become who they are by living under the post-modern condition.
CHILDHOOD – PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS – POSTMODERNISM

> Children, these strange beings we know nothing about, these wild
> creatures who do not understand our language.
> Larrosa, 1998, p.229

In a well-known essay in which Fredric Jameson (2004) puts forward his theory of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, postmodernism is presented as a cultural dominant that coordinates "new practices and new social and mental habits" and "new ways of organizing economic production", forged amid changes in capitalism (p.18). In making this statement, the author shows how close he is to what he takes to be Raymond Williams` conception[1] of a new "structure of feeling" being built in the twentieth century. In other words, for Jameson, the concept of postmodernism has to do with a movement that goes beyond the exclusive domains of art and esthetics into other spheres of contemporary existence; to do with a culture that makes economics and social and individual life continually interact to produce constant combinations and recombinations. Thus, postmodernism not only engenders a new existential condition, but also produces new ways of being and living, other types of subjects, postmodern people, and it is a small, albeit notable, example of this that our studies have given us.

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[1] Raymond Williams ranks among those authors who, in the second half of the twentieth century, gave a new direction to cultural analyses, with inestimable contributions to cultural theory and to the study of the new "texts" and practices produced by television, radio, the press and advertising. His major works – *Culture and society* (1958) and *The long revolution* (1961) – address the complex and profound cultural change in progress throughout the twentieth century, which has led to the constitution of a new "structure of feeling". Williams is one of the pioneers of contemporary cultural studies and one of the founders of the renowned Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham.

This article comprises sections from studies[2] that we have been conducting into the connections between school and contemporary culture, and in it we seek to demonstrate, interpret and problematize schoolchildren's ways of being at the beginning of this century. What we are doing here is selecting – from among a much more far-reaching set of findings and reflections in our research – elements that help us sketch out an overview that is to a greater or lesser degree suitable and appropriate to our intention of discerning a postmodern childhood[3] in our schools.

We understand that childhood is a cultural, social and historical construct that is subject to change. Human subjects in the early years of their lives have been the subject of a range of discourses, with distinct purposes, attributing meaning to ways of being and of living this period of existence. In western societies, whose cultural matrices we share, childhood and child subjects, as we still understand them today, are an invention of the project of the modern world, produced discursively for its own ends. Other ages, as well as this and other cultures, have produced and still produce varied meanings for childhood and ways of being a child.

Our studies are part of a matrix of intelligibility that sees the contemporary world as marked by particular overlapping conditions that are implicated in what has come to be widely known as postmodern culture. Major transformations have substantively changed the way we live today, and we understand that contemporary cultural conditions produce childhoods that are very different from what has conventionally been called modern childhood – naive, docile, dependent on adults – and change the ways in which children inhabit and experience the world. We are experiencing a state of culture – with far-reaching repercussions that come

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[2] This research involves projects carried out by Marisa Vorraber Costa with the support of the Brazilian National Scientific and Technologic Development Council – CNPq, entitled "When the Postmodern Invades the School: a Study of new cultural artifacts, identities and practices" (*Quando o pós-moderno invade a escola: um estudo sobre novos artefatos, identidades e práticas culturais* 2004-2007) and "Consumption, media and spectacle in the pedagogical setting: investigating relations between school and contemporary culture" (*Consumo, mídia e espetáculo na cena pedagógica: investigando relações entre escola e cultura contemporânea* 2007-2010); and Mariangela Momo's Ph.D. thesis (2007).

[3] We are using the term postmodern to signify a cultural condition that is distinct from that of the modern world. We understand that the postmodern entails one way in which contemporary culture presents itself and makes itself available, as well as a proliferation of ways of living in it. Hence the expression postmodern childhood.

from the media and from consumption – that has taken a very different shape from that of modernity and that has produced subjects very different from modern subjects.

One of the goals of this article is to make visible the ways of being that are shown by children going to a number of schools in the outlying neighborhoods of a major city from the south of Brazil at the start of this century. We have carried out one of the possible readings of how the child subjects of these schools are living their childhood in today's cultural conditions, and we indicate the productivity of this culture in inventing what we have chosen to call "a postmodern childhood". We have sought to show how such children are produced, formatted and manufactured in the culture of the media and of consumption, composing new ways of being children and living out their childhoods.

Studies by authors who seek to describe, interpret and problematize the postmodern cultural condition, including Bauman (1999, 1999a, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2007a, 2008), Lipovetsky and Roux (2005), Débord (1997), Jameson (2004), Harvey (1993), Sarlo (2000) and Yúdice (2004) have helped form the theoretical lenses of our studies, along with those authors carrying out cultural analyses of childhood, such as Steinberg and Kincheloe (2001), Bujes (2002, 2009), Schor (2004), Larrosa (1998), and of consumption – Baudrillard (1991), Klein (2003), and Fontenelle (2002), to name a few.

On our investigative journey we carried out visits and observations at schools selected for the study, conversing regularly with the children and informally with their teachers, their mothers, and the school staff. We took photographs and collected classroom work and in parallel to this we listened to accounts from teachers from other schools. All of this was recorded and gathered. Our goal was always to get people to speak and allow them to speak: to listen to a multitude of voices. To look not only at the visible in these schoolchildren's ways of being, but also to investigate, for example, the conditions producing their desires for becoming visible, as well as what they invested in themselves to become "images". Thus, throughout our research we maintained a state of alertness to what was current in the printed and televised media and on the internet, whether in the shape of soap operas and series, shows, sports and other cultural artifacts, or in publicity campaigns and on the news. We sometimes had to seek out a media source for what we observed in schools in terms of one or other manifestation in the classroom. This was the case, for example, when countless children's essays mentioned their dreams of decorating their bedrooms with a "eiderdown with a pattern of hearts" ("*edredom de coração*"), which led us to identify episodes of the

children's soap opera *Malhação*[4] where the eiderdown appeared. Articles and items published in newspapers and magazines about children, schools, the media and the connections between them also corroborated many of our observations, and enabled us to think about extending the scope of our inquiries and reflections. Seminars and study sessions held in universities and in a number of schools, as well as our participation in conferences, provided opportunities to discuss the data from a range of points of view, and added nuances to our analyses.

Focusing on, analyzing, and making visible the ways in which schoolchildren live their childhoods and become students of our time, we were able to detect a resonance with the cultural configurations of the contemporary world, continually pointed out by those authors who provide us with our conceptual and analytical tools. Ambivalence, ephemerality, disposability, individualism, visibility, superficiality, instability, and provisionality are all part of the lives of today's children. These are children who seek tirelessly to take part in a globally-acknowledged culture and be part of a community of consumers of those artifacts currently in vogue in the media; who produce their own bodies so as to harmonize them with the world of images and of spectacle; and who are characterized by constant, ceaseless movements and changes. These are children who seek fruition and pleasure tirelessly and in this pursuit blur the boundaries of class, gender and generation. These are children becoming what they are, living under the postmodern condition.

CONSUMERISM AS THE ORGANIZING AXIS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

In recent years, Bauman's analyses (1999, 1999a, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2007a, 2008) have enabled us to reflect upon the changes in modes of life of Post-War societies, and particularly those changes occurring in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. Bauman, through his painstaking scrutiny, provides us with perspectives, with ways of seeing and thinking, that enable us to make out the virtually invisible contours and incipient trends of a future rapidly turning into an increasingly enigmatic and mysterious present. His fecund and relevant recourse to the metaphor of fluids has been useful for our understanding of the volatile, provisional and unstable nature of a wide

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[4] This long-running young people's series produced in Brazil by Rede Globo de Televisão since 1995 is still being shown today.

range of domains in contemporary existence, affecting our concepts of freedom, security and fear, as well as identity, love and society. This helps us understand the tense state of incompleteness and the constant desire in which we find ourselves in this late stage of capitalism, where, as Jameson (2004) warns us, everything from nature to our unconscious has been transformed into merchandise. What therefore makes us turn to Bauman, in this presentation of our research, is the fact that he has constantly drawn our attention to the growing prominence of the phenomenon of consumption and to transformations in the way consumption occurs. Beyond admitting that we live in a consumer society, what this author has highlighted, bringing him closer to Baudrillard`s approach (1991), is that consumption has taken on a central role in present societies, unlike the society of our forebears which was characterized by production. A society that molded its members as producers has been replaced by one that molds them as consumers. And "the consumer in a consumer society is a markedly different creature from consumers in any other societies up until the present" (Bauman, 1999, p.88).

In *Vida para consumo* [Consuming Life], Bauman (2008) devotes himself centrally to examining this gradual transformation from a modern society of producers into today's society of consumers. Consumption has ceased to be a banal quotidian practice, with ancient roots dating back through centuries, becoming instead the organizing axis of today's societies, a fountainhead of inspiration for molding a vast range of forms of life and patterns of relations between people. In the society of consumers, people are at one and the same time consumers and merchandise. The turning point was the "consumerist revolution", where we went from consumption to consumerism. Whereas consumption is an occupation that people have, "consumerism is an attribute of society" (p.41), a social arrangement stemming from the recycling of human wishes, desires and wants, "society's operational and driving force". Consumerism comes into being when consumption takes on the central role formerly played by labor in a society of producers.

Bauman brings us face to face with the signs of a genuine invasion and colonization of human life by world-views and patterns of behavior that are inspired and molded by the market[5]. Consumerism is the central axis of the economy and of all human co-existence.

Along with other authors who have taken the same direction and highlighted the ways in which consumption has become the very ethos of current societies, Bauman stresses the importance of using concepts that address new phenomena and processes, including the "commoditization of consumers" and the "commoditization of labor"[6].

In this article we focus on the way in which children living in extreme poverty move within and integrate themselves into this world that is organized into, around and through consumption. We try to show how the feelings of what it is to be a child in today's world are also present in the lives of poor children in the schools where we carried out our research. This is because a person can be high tech without having a computer at home, or be a consumer with hardly any money, and try out the glamorized life of media and TV celebrities despite only being viewers of the "small screen".

In a context where the way in which we become human has changed radically, and where children's identities and subjectivities are forged in a postmodern scenario - of consumption, of the spectacle, of visibilities, of ephemerality, of media, of technologies, among other dimensions - thinking about what children are like who go to school in the early years of this century has become a fascinating, necessary task, but one that is to a certain extent unattainable. Children in these postmodern times are always challenging us, they slip from our grasp all the time, and speaking about them means addressing their ambivalences and infinite faces.

TIRELESS MUTANTS

In a world characterized by the abundance of products on offer, our existence depends on the rhythm and succession of the objects (Baudrillard, 1991). We believe that the children in the schools we studied are truly living the "age of objects". In this age, it is the meaning or meanings given to these objects, that which makes them not merely objects but cultural

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[5] Studies carried out by our research group have suggested this by investigating the productivity of certain cultural artifacts, such as the *Rebeldes* complex (Flor, 2007), the series entitled *Três espiãs demais* (Ignácio, 2007) and the *W.I.T.C.H* complex (Prates, 2008)

[6] The term "commoditization" derives from *commodity* (a Latin word whose meaning encompasses advantage and convenience) which means a consumer good. The expressions "commoditization of consumers" and "commoditization of labor", employed by Bauman, refer to the transformation of consumers and of labor into merchandise, in consumer goods.

artifacts, that leads to the acquisition, obsolescence and discarding of the objects. Here we should remember the studies of Klein (2003), demonstrating that it is the brand that confers meaning: the brand does not add value to the product, it *is* the value. Likewise, Klein says, products are more than just that, they are an artifact and also a cultural symbol, productive icons that operate on subjectivities. In the case of childhood, more than brands, it is commercialized childhood icons that make up the value of the artifacts. These icons are characterized by provisionality, instantaneity and ephemerality, so in giving shape to their lives, the children – somehow intermingling with the icons – end up inventing a *provisional, instantaneous, mutable* and *ephemeral* way of life.

In order to refer to the forms of life of these children, forms characterized by ceaseless, constant changes – including those changes prompted by commercialized cultural artifacts – we have chosen the term *"mutants"*. Although its current meaning and use refer to genetic mutations, we are using the term here as a metaphor to conceptualize the modes of life of children within schools, since change and movement make up their daily existence. "There is change, always change, new change – every movement lived is pregnant with a new beginning and a new ending" (Bauman, 2007a, p.88).

We understand that the "mutations" of the children in their continual state of change involve movements. Bauman (1999) says of this that even while we are physically stationary, we are in motion, as when we watch television, and leap into and out of hitherto unknown spaces faster than supersonic jet planes. The schoolchildren's bodies are always in motion, agitated and producing sounds The feeling one has is that they are living out what Sarlo (2000) dubbed the "television state", a state that cannot tolerate silence and immobility. Television increasingly signifies moving images, a breakneck rhythm and an absence of silence[7]. Simultaneity is another cornerstone of the movement of televisibility insofar as zapping allows access to several events virtually instantaneously. Children's worlds are all about simultaneity and instantaneity, children do several things at the same time, bearing out Steinberg and Kincheloe`s idea (2001) that sequential learning no longer seems to work at a time when quotidian existence is made up of saturation. The "television state" that children

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[7] We were struck, in an exercise we carried out comparing television advertisements from 1960 and 1970 with adverts from recent years, by the dizzying speed of the recent adverts. Likewise, watching children's cartoons as shown on the current programming of broadcasters is a challenge and a test to keep up with and understand the plots at the speed with which they unfurl.

experience not only includes this absence of silence and this uninterrupted movement, but also constant discourse about television programs, singing and dancing to the latest hit songs and playing with toys that are promoted by the media.

It should be stressed that the cultural industry plays a significant role by vastly expanding access to material and symbolic goods (in this case CDs, DVDs and technological entertainment and leisure devices such as Playstation, electronic games, mobile phones, toys and adornments) by offering cheaper versions of virtually all the desired merchandise. The schoolgirls would bring their Barbies to class, and we saw that imitations ten times cheaper circulated side by side with original dolls now virtually unrecognizable owing to the wear and tear of being thrown away several times by better-off child consumers. In other words, the expensive version of the famous doll, discarded by the employer's daughter, made the poor girl from the outlying public school happy. The symbolic capital of owning a Barbie seemed to have little to do with the condition or origin of the doll. What matters is being connected to the icon of the hour on television, in the cinema, in fashion, in all the magazines. Similar evidence can be seen for TV successes from the world of music. Pirate CDs would fly out of the kids` backpacks in school breaks so they could dance and sing to RDB playing the hits from *Rebelde*[8]. In *Rebelde*`s fleeting moment of fame you could hear the same hit songs being played in the corridors and yards of public and private schools. The television state was visible everywhere in our research.

We would like to stress that one of the ways in which poorer children from the schools we studied were able to take part in the cultures of media and consumption had to do with the "disposable society". While this culture produces excess, a situation in which everything quickly becomes obsolete, it also generates the highest indices of want, deprivation and poverty. The needy, which means the majority of the children in the schools we studied, have an "opportunity" to take part in the media culture and in the culture of consumption by taking possession of discarded excess. We saw that the disposal culture enables girls from these schools to carry Disney princess satchels, wear pop musician Sandy's sandals and Powerpuff Girls' T-shirts, all of which they found in the garbage[9].

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[8] A Mexican soap opera, produced by Televisa, and shown in Brazil by SBT in 2005 and 2006.

These boys and girls not only imitate but temporarily incorporate the mannerisms and adornments of top models, pop music stars, and what they see in television programs, films, soap operas, series and cartoons. The children, therefore, operate actively on the media culture and thus produce certain truths about themselves and about ways in which one can be a subject in the contemporary world. This is a widespread phenomenon that goes beyond the barriers set in place by their economic circumstances. Poor children reinvent themselves and "mutate" constantly, as do children from other layers of the population[10].

The use of television language is another frequent element making up this mutation of subjects. While we were carrying out our research, the expression "*Vem cá, eu te conheço?*" ("Wait a minute… do I know you?") - the catchphrase of the character Laura (as played by Maria Clara Gueiros) from Rede Globo Network's *Zorra total*, became part of the children's vocabulary in a range of social interactions at school. Sarlo (2000) states that living in a television state makes mastery and use of television's tools (the icons' ways of speaking, their behavior and jokes and so on) assure a certain type of *belonging*. The children appear to live in a continual state of anxiety and movement in an attempt to belong to a widely disseminated and shared television culture. We recorded several situations in which mastery of television language is part of their daily lives. It is worth remembering, however, that television's language, the meanings, childhood icons and artifacts that it puts in circulation, all change constantly since they are characterized by ephemerality, which means that the children continually change their ways of speaking, the characters they imitate, the topics they discuss and the desires they express, the interests they hold, the artifacts they carry on them, the people they connect with and even their own bodies, as we shall go on to discuss in this article. Long-standing behaviors in Western societies, such as following the moment's fashions or trends in what to wear, what body decoration to use, how to cut or dye one's hair or paint one's nails, are part of this state of motion, speed and ephemerality.

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[9] Many of the adults in these children's families, and indeed many of the children themselves, work as street garbage scavengers in the town where they live, or processing the garbage in recycling sheds in the school neighborhood.

[10] In another article on this research, Costa (2008) discusses this movement of selves that act upon themselves, perfecting themselves through exotic performances. She refers to "strange' students [who] are, above all, imitation-consumers permanently moving between the 'desire to own' and the possibility of 'seeming to own'" (p.285).

Completing sticker albums with the characters from films or TV programs, and watching or reading things about them, are part of children's daily lives at school, and these things also change the whole time. Just like other practices, these are waves that sweep everything before them, but which are short-lived. There is an enormous investment in completing the album, which takes center stage for a very short period in their lives. As soon as the album is completed, or even before then, it is quickly discarded and, like those media phenomena, above all TV phenomena, is easily replaced by another album or some other practice driven and coordinated by the cultures of the media and of consumption. In this process, children make up small, ephemeral partnerships to share their financial resources. The need to belong to a materialistic world culture leads poorer schoolchildren to establish superficial, temporary bonds with other children in order to obtain certain artifacts. They band together in order to achieve something that will allow them to be visible in something deemed publicly valid. For instance, there was a "partnership" between four children to manage to buy the *Rebelde* sticker album; each day a different child from the partnership would take the album home. Improvisation, rigging up the desired artifacts – often using materials available in school, such as paper, scissors, glue and adhesive tape – are other, equally provisional, ways in which the children achieve this, apart from loans, or game-mediated disputes, to become part of the cultural circuits of desire and consumption instigated by the media.

The children who are visible, valued, accredited in their universe are those who manage to carry certain artifacts on their person, the meanings of which have repercussions on a global scale, with a temporary validity within the permanently renewed panorama of the culture of consumption. The children are living in a world of visibilities in which it is more important to seem than to own: to seem to own, to seem to be. Radios at their ears, mobies at their belts, mobile phones on their desks, calculators in their hands and watches on their wrists. You often see children surrounding the wearers of such objects, proposing swaps and loans. Technological gadgets usually bestow prestige upon those carrying them, and promote belonging in a globally recognized culture. However, on the several occasions when we approached them to say that we would like to photograph these artifacts, their owners hastened to explain that not all of them worked. Few of the objects they carried had been experienced in working condition. Most of the children only carried them because they had been discarded by someone and no longer worked. They only explained this when pressed; they usually made out that the objects were in good condition, holding the radio to their ears

as if listening to music, keying numbers into the calculator when doing calculations, or appearing to own a working mobile phone.

We saw that even when children lack basic sanitation at home, they know details about how notebooks, mobiles and i-Pods work and how to use them, just as much as adults or more economically privileged children. From the media (and above all from television) and from life in the city, they learn to master a certain "grammar" of technological culture that they use in order to think and to live. By means of a certain type of cultural impregnation they become high-tech children. They are always obtaining new information about the technological universe that marks their way of life by constant mutation. Some public schools had computers in informatics laboratories, and many children volunteered to be monitors, and indeed wished to be full-time monitors. Others became familiar with technology by frequenting the simple neighborhood LAN centers of the outlying sectors where they live.

The consumer society "trains" everyone, even the poorer children from our study, to be consumers. It appears that the children develop a state of "readiness for consumption". They know about the latest toy launches, about the latest technological inventions, about the films showing in theaters, about the latest products for sale (from foodstuffs to clothing). One surprise that we had was to see how quickly enthusiasm for the *Rebeldes* group and the imitations of their performances were replaced by fascination for the new smash hit *Tropa de elite*. In a matter of days imitations of the new icons, no longer singers and musicians, but elite police officers, began to spring up everywhere in the yards and classrooms. A new wave sweeps quickly through the school environment.

This makes us think about one of the features of the consumer that Bauman (1999) identifies: the ability to forget, the ability not to maintain interest in a given artifact or practice for very long. In these schools the children seek to enjoy whatever the present moment offers them to the utmost, in any way they can. In these ever-changing practices, objects, desires and identities, the children themselves seem to be the mutant virus. One child "contaminates" another through the practices they have learned from the media (such as how to sing hit songs, consume certain icons, foodstuffs or products, how to play certain games, complete sticker albums, and so on). In this way they are the very virus that causes the "mutation" in themselves and in their fellows.

Bauman draws attention to this continuous state of change, resorting to the metaphor of fluids to refer to the world and to the societies of liquid modernity. The metaphor also applies to the lives of today's children.

> Fluids travel easily. They "flow", "spill", "run out", "splash", "pour over", "leak", "flood", "spray", "drip", "seep", "ooze"; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped—they pass round some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still. (2001, p. 8)

He goes on to argue that descriptions of liquids are like snapshots, and therefore need to be dated (Bauman, 2001). Liquids take on one shape at a given moment, and a different shape at another, and this seems to happen with many of the children in the schools we studied. To a certain extent they seem to possess some of the characteristics of fluids, such as being able to metamorphose – bodies, desires and behaviors. The fantastic and inexhaustible cultural repertoire of possibilities undoubtedly contributes to this. Thinking along the same lines as Deleuze and Guattari (1995/1997), we might say that their life practices are the expression of multiple, ceaseless agencies.

AN "IMAGE" TO EXIST IN THE WORLD OF VISIBILITY AND ON THE STAGE OF SCHOOL

In a world named and understood by Debord (1997) as a "society of the spectacle", the children of the schools we investigated prepare their bodies to be seen on the school "stage". We believe that the school has been one more place, like the internet and so many other places, where it is possible to become visible. Postmodern children go to school on a daily basis, and it is for this spectacularized display on this stage that they prepare their bodies. One of the elements making up a spectacle is the audience, and for a performance to take place one must be seen, appreciated or criticized. School appears to be a privileged setting for this, since several audiences mingle there – their peers (other show-bodies), teachers, the parents of students, the staff. As Mirzoeff (2003) argues, watching images (in this case the children's bodies) is a collective experience like cinema, not an individual activity. This peculiar phenomenon in which children seek to make up images of themselves is a product of this universe. What reinforces the argument of the school as a stage is the way in which it has increasingly been used in order to render visible certain projects and brands of major

corporations, becoming a reference space for the initiatives of *civil society linked with large companies that wish to associate their image with social actions[11]*.

This aspect of the school as a stage also relates to the cultural conditions of today's world – a world, as we have argued, increasingly partaking of the spectacle and peopled by images, making up our daily experiences with the experiences of an intensely visual culture (Mirzoeff, 2003). As Fontenelle (2002) states, in what has become a media-driven society, images are to be consumed and not merely contemplated, as was the case with sacred images, for example. We consume the images that we are offered in order to build our own image, since we know that "to be in the image is to exist" (p. 23). The images that act upon us, and upon which we act, work both to produce as well as to articulate and negotiate meanings. They produce identities, create truths and constitute subjects. School has thus been both a stage on which countless images that make up a highly consumerist and media-based culture project themselves, and a stage on which show-bodies parade themselves. It seems that the school, usually seen as centering on written and oral pedagogies, is gradually becoming more of a place where visual pedagogies operate, teaching people about desirable images, about what is *in* and what is *out* when it comes to preparing one's own body. Paying attention to children's bodies can provide clues about how they are becoming subjects and how they are consuming the world that is out there, and being consumed by it. Mirzoeff (2003) argues that visual culture is one way of studying everyday postmodern life more from the consumer's perspective than from the producer's. We point out that consumption is understood here to mean not only the obtaining of material goods, but also, and chiefly, obtaining meanings and representations that promote desires and the processes of identification.

We observe that postmodern children always desire to be part of the world of visibilities, they wish to appear, in order to "be". In the consumer society each subject is engaged in entrepreneurial practices intended to transform him or herself into a saleable, consumable commodity. It is not hard to understand, therefore, why most children want to be "famous", which means to be noted, commented on, desired. In other words, something to be consumed, another commodity in the society of consumers, as Bauman (2008) analyzes it.

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[11] We address this issue in the article entitled "The convenience of the school" ("*A conveniência da escola*" – Costa, Momo, 2009).

Decking out one's own body in accordance with the parameters of beauty and youth put about by the media and consumerism itself seems to be one way in which one can become a commodity for consumption. What is in fashion in the media of the moment thus seems inseparable from the bodies of schoolchildren, who seek tirelessly to turn themselves into something saleable, consumable and desirable. We even recorded discussions among the children in which they show how central the body is to the chance of having money, being visible and being "happy". During one activity in Junior Education, the teacher asked the children to draw what they wanted to be when they grew up. One boy drew himself as a model, walking down the runway in a swim suit. When the other boys asked him if he would be prepared to walk down the runway wearing only a swim suit he answered: "sure, if I do it wearing just a swim suit I will get paid more", and a heated discussion took place among the boys to find out who else would be prepared to walk down the runway wearing nothing but a swim suit.

When Sarlo (2000) affirms that in contemporary society consumption organizes itself around the valuation of youth, he points out that products for the body and procedures for impacting it are launched on a daily basis – both staving off old-age among adults and bringing children forward from childhood into youth. These products and procedures intend to carry out a scheduled, foreseen, desired, produced and imposed metamorphosis on the body. Unlike in the past, when the body was seen as a gift from God, bodies are planned nowadays on the basis of desires expressed on a computer screen (remember the controversial case of Michael Jackson). These desires are constructed so that we can dream of the countless possibilities of designing and transforming our bodies. We live in a world in which there are novelties for the body launched every day. Artifacts and procedures are discarded virtually "unused" and immediately replaced by the next novelties, ephemeral themselves also, which produces the feeling that we are never sufficiently up-to-date where the body is concerned. In other words we feel the same feeling of incompleteness and vertigo about our own bodies as we do in regard to those incessant technological novelties. The commercial media appeal institutes body fashions that cover and exploit the body from head to toe (toe-rings and multi-color, sculpted hairdos are examples of this), making use of the "commercial space of the body" (Sarlo, 2000).

We recorded countless situations in our research showing how far children are not only interested in but ceaselessly dedicated and committed to the body-related novelties put in

motion by the cultural industry. Habits such as tattooing oneself, wearing piercings, silicone chains and bracelets, dying or fading one's hair, cutting it into the shapes of media icons like Spiderman or the Nike symbol ("swoosh"), applying glitter to one's eyelids, painting one's nails with garish colors, wearing make-up, clothes, footwear and accessories that display media heroes are permanent facets of their lives but ones that also change with dizzying speed. The children display true prowess "shedding" one body and "fixing themselves" with another. They show a fantastic ability to redesign their image constantly, just like their way of being and living in the world, discarding whatever is no longer in fashion and plunging into the purchase of new possibilities for their bodies which are as intense as they are fleeting.

The ability to integrate themselves into this universe also has to do with the way in which they acquire the apparatus to prepare the desired body. This was the case with one child who removed his dog's chain and hung it around his own neck to look like a popular singer of the time, or another who asked his grandmother to give him an old chain she owned so that he could embellish himself. We also recorded situations in which the school seemed to be "the temple of consumption" supplying the necessary material to make up the desired look in the case of children who could not afford to buy their own material. An example of this was a child who asked to be allowed to take home a sheet of crepe paper in order to extract from it the dye needed to dye her hair; another child who took a hooped ear-ring from the fancy-dress box, in order to apply it to her nose and make believe it was a piercing; and girls who painted their nails in a range of colors using marker pens and watercolors.

Tattoos, even peel-off tattoos, are used by children hoping to turn heads, since everyone wants to look at the image of Batman or the *Rebeldes*. Likewise a colorful Spiderman T-shirt, displayed with body movements that mimic the film character, can make people stop and stare in school. Sant'Anna, addressing the issue of contemporary bodies, says that the trend is to:

> ...turn all the parts of the body into brand images, in a privileged marketing of the self. Therefore, the desire to invest in body images is proportional to the desire to make for oneself a body entirely ready to be filmed, photographed, or otherwise seen and admired... (2002, p. 106)

In our study, the children's bodies seem always ready to become visible, to become an image as if from a show. These children live in the empire of the image and are themselves images made up of given brands, particular icons of entertainment corporations, and likewise

they disseminate all this, becoming walking posters (Bujes, 2009). Bodies that are the surfaces for inscriptions, as Santos (2007) says, where the brands refer to desirable meanings that remove them from the universe of poverty, want, pain and sadness. In our analysis we also agree with Schor's study (2004), in which the author draws attention to the fact that most American children believe that their clothes and corresponding brands affirm who they are.

Very young children demonstrate "concerns" with their bodies that would have been unthinkable or unacceptable in former times. As was the case with one five-year-old girl we observed in one of the schools, who spent almost fifteen minutes hesitating between eating – a vital necessity – or keeping her lipstick intact – an esthetic necessity. Lipstick, enamel, perfumes and accessories like earrings, rings, necklaces, bracelets, sunglasses and hair slides are ever-present among schoolgirls. But since not all of them own such valuable objects, the owner of the nail enamel, for example, will be surrounded by several classmates in the break, in the canteen and during class time. These artifacts are constantly bartered in exchanges ("Let's swap, if I 'give' you my Powerpuff Girls' slippers, will you 'give' me your Barbie sandals?"), loans and shares ("If you don't lend me your lipstick I won't be your friend any more"), or even thefts: "Miss, I left my lipstick in my bag and someone's stolen it".

It should be pointed out that looking after the body is not exclusively a female concern. Boys take just as much trouble over their bodies and it is common to find them wearing piercings and other adornments like rings, bracelets and chains, painting their nails, and cutting, styling and dying their hair.

Show-bodies moving in a world of visibilities, an image-saturated world, making up the highly visual culture of consumption and to a certain extent bringing this world into the school. Bodies that seem to experience the glamorized lives of TV stars, bodies parading themselves through the spaces of the school, when they dance and sing for the audience made up of their schoolmates.

A CHILDHOOD WITHOUT FRONTIERS

Marking boundaries is something that makes establishing differences essential. However, as Cohen (2000) discusses, the differences are arbitrary, floating, and mutable rather than essential. Here, therefore, it is important to consider the arguments of Bauman (1999a) who states that the pursuit of order – setting up differences, classifying, naming – is

inherent to the modern world. Modernity, the author argues, means a horror of mixing (because mixing offers no clues as to predicting how to move forward) and an obsession with separating. This constant quest to separate, name, classify and establish differences generates *ambivalence*. Put differently, however much one seeks a place for everything, something is always out of place, fitting nowhere, or fitting into several places at the same time. This is why, argues the author, *ambivalence* is modernity's main fear and most worrying precaution. So, if "ambivalence is the very denial of modernity" (Bauman, 1999a, p.23), one may say that we live in an age that has produced much more "denial", since many more things have remained outside the classifying schemes.

If we think of childhood, we observe that there are more children who do not slot into the modern classifying systems, who do not "fit" anywhere in the established order, or alternatively who "fit" into several places at the same time, than children who fit perfectly into the established order, into the known cartographies. We think that postmodern childhood takes root in ambivalence – insofar as it is polyvalent and plurifaceted – undermining the binary thought process of "this or that", replacing it by the possibility of being this, that and the other thing too...

In regard to this ambivalent condition, Lipovestsky and Roux (2005), studying the changes that have taken place in spending on luxury articles, say that in modern times luxury was intended mainly to demarcate the classes, and that in contemporary times, although it still does establish these distinctions, it has much more to do with delight, satisfaction, indulging oneself, *fruition* (in the sense of enjoyment) and pleasure. Luxury thus mingles the styles of different groups, of different categories of objects (extremely expensive pieces with very cheap pieces) and is characterized by mobility. This brings us once more to consumption, which hinges much more on the pursuit of thrills, personal sensations, enjoyment of the pleasures of life, than a consumption that intends to mark social and hierarchical distinctions or other differences. We are thus, to a certain extent, experiencing the blurring of boundaries between what has conventionally been called "social class", and childhood is also experienced on this blurring of frontiers. Which allows us to begin thinking of childhood as a global childhood, although we know that the risks of making this statement are enormous and demand a consistent and complex argument that we do not intend to develop within the constraints of the present text[12].

We find children from renowned private schools for more affluent students, as well as lower-income children from the outlying neighborhood schools, pulling wheeled satchels bearing the Barbie, Powerpuff Girls and Spiderman brands, even though the satchels are probably priced completely differently. In other words, *fruition* – one of the dimensions characterizing postmodern culture – is one of the conditions allowing frontiers to fade and blur and be crossed. It seems that more and more people, including poorer schoolchildren, seek pleasure, enjoyment, delight, *fruition*, and this pursuit respects no "frontiers". Bauman's argument (2005) is that in a society in which the norm is to consume, non-consumers are seen as figures spoiling the landscape, and cause fear because they are unhappy, dangerous and marginal. We think it can be stated that many of the children, since they somehow manage to carry the same consumerist icons, and share the same meanings, desires and concerns in life as children from other groups in the social hierarchy, somehow cease to be the other, the different, the intimidating, the freakish. The mass production of the cultural industry entails a certain type of "inclusion".

It must be stressed that this blurring of the frontiers of social stratification (even if this blurring represents no more than the duration of a performance) occurs in a double meaning, since it is the pursuit of *fruition* that prevails. Children from lower-income groups have access to goods and messages that were formerly specific to members of economically privileged groups, while these groups likewise share the goods, messages and meanings that used to be specific to these others – the "poor".

In recent years when *funk* (a style of music from the *favelas* in Rio) was one of the most widely sung and danced styles of music among schoolchildren and adolescents, it also penetrated the most economically privileged layers of Brazilian society. As the lyrics said "O *funk* do meu Rio se espalhou pelo Brasil/Até quem não gostava, quando viu, não resistiu" (The funk from Rio spread throughout Brazil, even those who hated it, dug it when they saw what it was like)[13].

In a world in which everything changes so swiftly, where artifacts, feelings and personal relationships are fleeting, *to enjoy*, to feel pleasure, is something that people want

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[12] We address the issue in the article entitled "To think the globalization of childhood and school-age youth: a view of consumption" (Costa, Momo, 2009a).

[13] *Glamurosa* (find this song at: http://www.allthelyrics.com/forum/lyrics-translation/11424-help-please-translate-in-german-or-englisch.html; viewed: May 18, 2007).

today, now. Holding out against a style of music, for example, may entail the loss of opportunities to experience dazzling moments of sheer pleasure because at any moment the style may cease to be associated with the meanings that made it so special, and the people who danced that style before will now be doing other things, moving in other rhythms and under new inspirations.

Although we agree with Yúdice (2004) that "[...] it is difference and not homogenization that disseminates the prevailing logic of accumulation" (p. 50), and that market strategies make use of differences to promote consumption, we think that commercial exploitation (in the case of Rio de Janeiro *funk*) of what used to be a difference increasingly promotes a kind of cultural homogenization and the actual "dissolution" of the difference that was initially exploited.

With regard to consumption by children, investment is often made so as to promote/exploit gender differences. In the case of the schools that we studied, there is often a gender distinction through the consumption of certain icons and artifacts. The bodies of the children are mainly made up of artifacts that promote identification with the male or the female. At the same time, however, the infinite possibilities for consumption that the contemporary world offers begin to promote the use of artifacts that were usually associated with one sex (rings for girls, for instance) by the opposite sex – in this case, boys wearing rings, ear rings, dying their hair, and so on.

According to Louro (2001), thinking gender means understanding it as a process that not only separates men from women, but also men from men and women from women. We have thus observed artifacts and practices that were deemed feminine being appropriated by boys, precisely to differentiate themselves from other boys and integrate themselves with "media waves". This ends up blurring sex boundaries to a certain extent. Boys who wear rings on several fingers, chains and ear rings, paint their nails and dye their hair are producing another way of being a boy in which concerns about and care for the body are central. These boys are somehow in tune with the world in which the central role played by consumption is expressed and organized around esthetics, beauty, style and visibility.

Another breakdown of frontiers among schoolchildren in the contemporary world has to do with generations. Thus far we have addressed childhood and children without defining the ages of the subjects to whom we are referring. Our decision not to demarcate the age-range for postmodern childhood is grounded on several factors. One of them, as Sarlo (2000)

argues, is that what may be understood as youth (or childhood) in one historical age may no longer be considered youth or childhood at another moment in history. It is not age that defines childhood, but the understanding, the meanings, and the practices related to it. We therefore think that one of the ways of understanding postmodern childhood is precisely by taking into consideration this blurring of the boundaries of generations.

At one moment of our research, silicone bracelets were so widespread that we found very young children, older children, and even their parents, wearing them. This is a culture of consumption (not only of material goods but above all of meanings) that works in such a way as to make it impossible to say what is specific to one generation or another. The boundaries between what is "proper" to childhood and what is "proper" to the adult world have faded away. It seems to us that children are increasingly becoming more adult-like, and that adults are increasingly becoming more child-like in the infinite possibilities for consumption that the contemporary world offers us.

This breaking-down of the barriers between generations also has to do with ways of speaking and of showing emotions. On numerous occasions the children from the schools we studied, including the junior school children, used language full of slang, even sexual slang, normally deemed common to youths and adults but unusual in the childish universe.

Costa and Born (2009), based on data from research into children's use of mobile telephones, stated that the mobile phone has led to the disappearance of childhood as a phase of dependence, insecurity and ignorance, bringing children closer to the adult world. Most children feel dependent upon their mobiles because this is the best way to make and keep friends, with whom they let off steam, share their daily experiences, and give and take advice. The vast majority of them state that they use mobiles to learn about things, play games, watch videos and listen to their favorite bands, without adult interference. Boys, in turn, use their mobiles, from the age of six, to extend their knowledge about that private space of adulthood, closed off to modern childhood – sexuality.

More and more small children behave as if they were adolescents or young adults. Sarlo (2000) states that this desire to be a young adult, or look young, comes from the fact that childhood no longer provides a suitable basis for happiness, and youth has the advantage of bringing sex into play while not requiring that people assume the responsibilities of adulthood. "Childhood has virtually disappeared, hemmed in by extremely precocious adolescence. Early

youth goes on until well into someone's thirties. One-third of one's life passes under the label of youth, a label as conventional as any other label" (Sarlo, 2000, p. 30).

POSTMODERN SCHOOLCHILDREN: AN IMPOSSIBLE CARTOGRAPHY

If "an orderly world is a world in which 'one knows how to go on' (or, what amounts to the same, one knows how to find out – and find out *for sure* – how to go on)" (Bauman, 1999a, p.10), then the postmodern world seems to be just the opposite, it is the empire of disorder. There is no single order, but many orders, orders without end; ambivalence and polyvalence prevail, and it is increasingly difficult to establish order where there appear to be no frontiers. More and more children, shaped by new and various cultural practices, enter our schools, where they bother, upset and destabilize, because it is somehow no longer possible to classify them, and place them within a cartography. Without this assurance of order and stability, guaranteed for many years by modern pedagogical frameworks, postmodern educators are insecure, adrift, confused, virtually immobilized.

It is worth remembering Jameson's statement at this point, which was mentioned at the outset of this article, that the postmodern world is forging postmodern people. The new technologies have been crucial in the unprecedented arrangements being sketched out between economics, social life and private life, shuffling and dealing these domains in infinite feedback loops. Many authors have underlined the central role played by technologies in reconfiguring life and feelings in the new age. These technologies are composing new forms of child cognition and producing a sophisticated understanding and codification of human experience in new languages. However, we should here remember Deleuze's statement (1992) that "It is easy to make certain types of machine conform to each society, not because the machines are determinants, but because they express the social forms able to give birth to them and use them" (p.223). The numerous and ever-increasing contingent of postmodern children in our schools is made up of beings ready to work with this new cultural grammar that we adults still find difficult to decipher. Strange, threatening and misunderstood beings regard us in the school yards, corridors and classrooms. Childhood as the phase of innocence, dependence, insecurity and ignorance of the secrets of the world and of life seems to be disappearing fast. In its place the childhoods of postmodern times are installing themselves – unfathomable, multiple, unstable, paradoxical, savage, uncontrollable, enigmatic.

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