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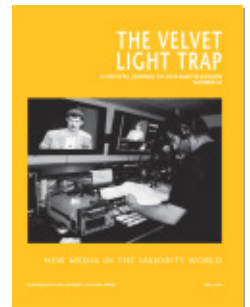
Reality Bites and Generation X as Spectator

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Reality Bites and Generation X as Spectator

This article is about the life and times of an idea called “Generation X,” and, in particular, it is about the articulation of this idea with regard to contemporary visual culture. According to Jim Finnegan, “[N]othing has been assumed to be so thoroughly incorporated, so cliché, as the term Generation X. The common-sense consensus in both academic popular culture studies and subcultural theory, as well as in the ‘alternative’ youth culture industries themselves, is that Generation X is so passé, so universally un-hip, that even by remarking its passing one risks marking oneself as square beyond repair.” It is perhaps because of the rank unhipness of the notion of Generation X that the subject remains almost wholly untouched by those working under the rubric of cultural studies. Subcultural theorists, it seems reasonable to assume, prefer their subcultures to be far more radical, both aesthetically and politically, than the middle-class, white-boy angst that the term Generation X suggests.

This article therefore addresses something of a void within cultural studies. I would suggest this void to be quite a large one, since Gen X was one of *the* subjects of U.S. public culture during the 1990s. My purpose here is to partially recuperate the notion of Generation X for cultural studies if only because I believe such a project holds valuable lessons for those wishing to apprehend the historical conditions of contemporary subcultural formations. My argument here is that Generation X qua subcultural configuration, itself a construct of various layers (mainstream, niche-targeted, and independent) of U.S. media vectors in the 1990s, is somewhat removed from how subcultures are understood in already-received

(what might be called “traditional”) versions of subcultural theory. In essence, I suggest that Generation X is more usefully defined as a spectatorship rather than as a group of individuals with common practices and rituals. Through a reading of the emblematic Gen X film *Reality Bites*, I argue that the subcultural specificity of Gen X subjectivity revolves more around a unique relationship with media—particularly visual media—rather than a visual style (e.g., dress, music tastes, etc.).

Indeed, the purpose here is not to call into question the media’s representation of the Xer subculture. The function of disputing media representations of the Xer subculture has been under way for some time within the subculture itself, making an academic retread of this exercise somewhat irrelevant. Moreover, this article aims to use the example of Generation X to question many of the assumptions underpinning such a practice. In this article I will limit myself to analyzing only media representations of Gen Xers rather than conducting any ethnographic research into the “authentic” Gen X subculture itself. The purpose here is not to infer any truths about “actual” Gen Xers from these media representations, however, but to illuminate the historical role that media representations have had in the constitution of the “authentic” Gen X subculture. Following theorists such as Sarah Thornton, I argue that the Generation X subculture is thoroughly dependent on the media—even the mainstream media—for its very identity. Whereas past subcultural theorists have tended to dismiss mass media as a “repressive” mechanism that aims to nullify the radical potential of subcultures, I argue that, in the case of contemporary subcultural formations, the media can just as easily act as a “productive” mechanism. That

is, the media helps to generate and proliferate subcultural identity even as it appears to be subjugating and containing it. To demonstrate this point I look to the varying receptions of the Gen X film *Reality Bites*. To further explore the interconnections between the categories of “media” and “authentic subcultural identity,” I go on to give a detailed reading of the film’s narrative, which itself serves as a rumination on subcultural identity. It is first necessary, however, to introduce the notion of Generation X.

Generation X, On-Screen and Off

Prior to 1991, no one in the U.S. mainstream media talked about Generation X or even indicated that they knew such a category existed. And then, almost overnight, Generation X became one of the most talked about subjects in the U.S. media and remained so for several years. The absurd nature of this “discovery” was, according to *Spin* magazine publisher Bob Guccione Jr., akin to the media “all of a sudden noticing France” (Ritchie 9). The term *Generation X*—borrowed from Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel of the same name—began to operate in public culture as a catch-all label for a particular formation of problematic youth. Generation X came to be understood as the nascent generation, the people who would one day usurp the heroic sixties generation (the baby boomers) and force them into retirement. Talk of a “generation gap” and “generational warfare” ensued, and the opinion makers of the mainstream media (many of whom were self-declared baby boomers) lined up to question the sensibilities and values of youthful America. For example, according to *Time* magazine, Xers

have trouble making decisions. They would rather hike in the Himalayas than climb a corporate ladder. They have few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own. They crave entertainment, but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial. They hate yuppies, hippies and druggies. They postpone marriage because they dread divorce. They sneer at Range Rovers, Rolexes and red suspenders. What they hold dear are family life, local activism, national parks, penny loafers and mountain bikes. They possess only a hazy sense of their own identity but a monumental preoccupation with all the problems the preceding generation will leave for them to fix. (Scott 56)

This quasi-anthropological approach was a popular one within the mainstream media and quickly became the dominant modality through which the American public was made familiar with this mysterious new entity. A notorious article in *Newsweek*, for instance, sought to characterize Gen X as “The Whiny Generation” that seemed to the author to possess a presumptuous sense of entitlement. The author of this article—David Martin, a self-identified baby boomer—explained that he was “fed up with the ceaseless carping of a handful of spoiled, self-indulgent, overgrown adolescents” (Martin 237). Such a tone, which constitutes Xers as anthropological objects to be studied, is characteristic of much of the early discourse within the mainstream media concerning Gen X. This coverage, focused largely within the pages of North American news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Republic*), is centered very heavily, to quote the title of one such article, “On the Character of Generation X” (Schaub 3). For instance, in 1998 the journal *American Enterprise* published opposing pieces titled “Gen X Is OK” (Ericsson 38–41) and “No . . . Generation X Is Not OK” (Sacks 46–48). Such commentary eschewed any historical, social, or economic contextualization, and thus, according to Sherry Ortner, “one may come to feel . . . that there is a kind of Baudrillardian process at work—a free play of signifiers with no referent, really, at all” (416). Media commentators often seemed to be arguing about media representations without pausing to consider either the empirical accuracy of such representations or—better—the function that those representations might perform.

The purpose here, however, is not to dispute the accuracy of the representations of the Gen X subculture within this first wave of media hysteria. I follow Sarah Thornton in arguing that traditional approaches within subcultural theory “tend to position the media and its associated processes in opposition to and after the fact of subculture,” when media (including mass media as well as niche and underground media) is in fact constitutive of subcultural identity (“Moral Panic” 189). According to Thornton,

The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside of media and commerce is a resilient one. . . . Scholars of youth and music culture are among the most tenacious holders of the idea. One explanation for this is undoubtedly that their studies reproduce the anti-mass-media

discourses of the youth formations they study. While youth celebrate the “underground,” academics venerate “subcultures”; where one group denounces the “commercial,” the other criticizes “hegemony”; where one laments “selling out,” the other theorizes “incorporation.” (“Moral Panic” 176)

The effect of traditional theoretical approaches to spectacular subcultures thus reifies a distinction between “subculture” and “media” that I hold to be untenable in the case of Generation X. In my analysis, the term *Generation X* designates not an authentic subculture that pre-exists its media representations but an identity that is always already performed within mediated space. In the words of Thornton, “[M]edia and other culture industries are there and effective right from the start” (*Club Cultures* 117). Indeed, the wave of media hysteria that attacked the sensibilities of Generation X apparently had the effect of precipitating a previously nonexistent sub-cultural subjectivity for Xers. Suddenly a space was opened within the media for a new breed of commentator such as Douglas Coupland, Richard Linklater, and Bob Guccione Jr. to speak on behalf of Generation X.

While the commentary of the news media created one important public space for the performance of Xer identity, I would argue that visual media was even more important. Cinema was singularly influential in the production and dissemination of the idea of Generation X. The film industry (both Hollywood and independent) was enormously enthusiastic in its willingness to represent Gen X, and the most enduring images of Xers come from films such as *Slacker*, *Reality Bites*, and *Clerks*. I would argue, however, that the first inklings of Generation X on-screen came with the changing representations of children in the 1980s and early 1990s. Prior to the 1980s, it was extremely rare to see a Hollywood film in which the hero is a child. From then onward, however, it became almost the norm in the biggest of Hollywood blockbusters (such as *E. T.*, *Back to the Future*, *Home Alone*, and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*). I would argue that the notion of generational conflict between Gen Xers and their boomer parents and the treatment of youth in sub-cultural terms (i.e., as an autonomous social formation with shared meanings and representations) have their roots in these 1980s “kids’ flicks.” Many of these films (*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, *Home Alone*), which were heavily marketed toward children and adolescents, enact an

opposition between savvy, competent kids and dim-witted adults. In *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, for instance, the adolescent protagonist comes up against a variety of older authority figures (parents, schoolteachers), all of whom are metonymically identified with the world of grown-ups. It is implicit here that youth is not understood as a primarily developmental or biological concept but as a social formation that stands in resistance toward grown-up society. Such a narrative strategy, I would suggest, mobilizes the same nebulous conception of generational subjectivity that later, more recognized Xer films also employ.

According to most media commentators, the first “authentic” cinematic representation of the Xer came in 1991 with the release of Richard Linklater’s film *Slacker*. Released in the same year as Coupland’s *Generation X*, Linklater’s small independent production—made on a budget of just \$23,000—was enormously successful. In large part, this success might be attributed to the extraordinary amount of coverage given to the film by various levels of media that felt that it encapsulated the spirit of Generation X (Rushkoff 44–49). The success of *Slacker* was followed by what can only be described as a feeding frenzy on the part of both major and independent U.S. production companies, which commissioned literally hundreds of projects, trying to replicate the success of the Linklater film. These included much of the remainder of Linklater’s seven-film oeuvre (with the singular exception of *The Newton Boys*), which explored similar territory to *Slacker* from a variety of different angles, the films of Kevin Smith (*Clerks*, which emulated *Slacker* in terms of budget and box-office success, as well as *Mallrats* and *Chasing Amy*), and a variety of other films, such as *Singles*, *The Last Days of Disco*, *Bodies*, *Rest and Motion*, *Spanking the Monkey*, and other non-American examples of the genre, such as Australia’s *Love and Other Catastrophes*, Greece’s *Apontes*, and Britain’s *The Low Down*. Typically, these films made use of a quasi-ethnographic style that sought to document the lives of contemporary white middle-class youth, prominently featured soundtracks made up of the then-current vanguard of the alternative scene, and were highly intertextual with regard to visual culture.

A turning point within the brief period of “Gen X fever” came with 1994’s *Reality Bites*. This major studio attempt to cash in on the wave of Gen X-marketed films of the time was seen by many outside

the mainstream media as a crass and tasteless marketing ploy and was heavily criticized by some commentators on Gen X issues (Rushkoff 299). Following the release of *Reality Bites*, it arguably became more difficult for the film industry to aggressively market its products toward the youth demographic it aimed for, lest it too be accused of cashing in on the Gen X phenomenon. Parodies of the “typical” Xer began to emerge, for instance, in *Clueless* (1995) in the character of Cher’s slacker brother, who idles away his time by reading Nietzsche while lazing by the pool, or the amusing interplay between Dr. Evil and his Xer son, Scott Evil, in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997). Both representations attempted to ridicule the Xer subculture according to the popular image that had been disseminated through the media. Generation X, according to this image, was self-absorbed, pretentious, and whiny.

While a comprehensive survey of the media representations of the Xer subculture is scarcely possible here, I wish to draw attention to one aspect in particular within this coverage. I want to suggest here that, in the final analysis, the term *Generation X* always seems to designate something in the order of spectatorship. In other words, being Gen X has something fundamentally to do with being a spectator in a way that being a baby boomer, for instance, does not. To take a few examples from the debate over the generation gap, conservative commentators such as Allan Bloom and Peter Sacks decry the ruinous effect TV has had on young minds. With regard to the democratic process, political lobby groups such as Lead or Leave and Third Millennium claim that Generation Xers have been reduced to the status of spectators through their own cynicism and apathy. In polemical, pro-Gen X tracts such as Douglas Rushkoff’s *GenX Reader*, Xers are also rendered as spectators in that they are forced to stand by and watch as baby boomers monopolize public life. Even the supposed speech codes of Gen Xers position them as spectators. According to linguist Raymond Gozzi Jr., “[T]he main linguistic marker of an X’er is the use of the word ‘like.’ I have wondered about this verbal tic, and have yet to see a satisfactory explanation of it in print. Here’s my stab at it: ‘like’ is used to set a stage, a scene, like television.” Furthermore, in the wave of Gen X-targeted films I mentioned earlier, the category of Gen X is also tethered to the category of spectatorship. For example, consider the spectatorship of the Xer characters in *Reality*

Bites who are perpetually watching and talking about film, TV, and advertising, the lengthy discourses on *Star Wars*, pornography, and trashy B-movies by the characters in *Clerks* (1994), and the relentless intertextuality and referencing of popular culture in contemporary films about—or targeted toward—youth and youth culture.

By way of contrast, I would suggest that baby boomer identity—representing the hegemonic regime of taste against which Generation X is measured—is associated far more with “doing” than with “watching.” That is, boomer identity is correlated more with *participation* in historical events (such as Woodstock and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations) than with standing back and watching (Howe and Strauss). Throughout the media discourse on the baby boom generation (particularly in the late 1980s and 1990s, when boomers matured into the pre-eminent social class in America), boomers’ identity is seen to hinge on metaphors of action and achievement. Boomers are constructed as the prime movers of recent American history—as “reformers,” “activists,” and even “revolutionaries.” To underscore this point, *Time* magazine said of the boomers that “they believe in J.F.D.I.—just frigging do it” (Kunen 29).

Even the boomer touchstones that *are* spectatorial in nature—for instance, the 1969 moon landing, as experienced through the TV set—are inscribed as quite exceptional instances of a peculiarly “active” spectatorship. That is, the mass “act” of spectatorship becomes an historical event in itself, such that people remember where they were when they saw Neil Armstrong walk on the moon, as if, in this particular instance, “watching” was tantamount to “participating.” For instance, consider a nostalgic magazine article, written at the time of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the moon landing, in which the author reminisces about how he drove his family to view the launch of Apollo 11. Titled “One Small Drive,” the article conflates the family’s act of spectatorship with the event itself, such that family members are reinscribed as participants in history (Franzen). At the conclusion of the article this becomes explicit—the author recalls that, after viewing the shuttle launch, the family made sure that they “followed closely on television the spaceship’s journey. We were a part of it now” (Franzen 37).

Thus, the deviance of Xer subcultural subjectivity lies in its perverse privileging of “watching” over “doing.” While baby boomers are mythologized as those who made history, Xer identity is presided over by the trope

of the “slacker”: the indolent, apathetic, couch-dwelling TV addict. Another piece written around the time of the moon landing anniversary makes this point abundantly clear. Next to a grainy image from the moon landing, the author notes that “when those over 40 look at it, they hear the words ‘The Eagle has landed.’ But when twentysomethings look at it, they hear the electric chords that accompany the image when MTV goes to station identification. If you slept through the moonwalk in your cradle and grew up with *Star Wars*, it’s possible that the movie was as impressive to you as Apollo 11 was to your parents” (Adato 8). While boomers supposedly identify with the “actual historical event” signified by the image, Xers recall only the appropriation of this image by throwaway entertainment media. Likewise, the article seems to detect something perverse about Xers relating to *Star Wars*—mere trivial entertainment—in the same way that their parents relate to the “actual historical event” of the moon landing. The implication seems to be that, for Generation X, the categories of “media” and “reality” have become fatally confused, inverted, or perhaps dissolved altogether.

Generation X as a Spectatorial Subculture

Peter Sacks, author of *Generation X Goes to College*, recounts a scene from the action movie *Crimson Tide* (1995), suggesting it functions as an allegory for some aspect of Generation X’s character. While this theory is open to question, I would suggest that the scene—written, incidentally, by Quentin Tarantino, who was drafted in by the movie’s producers to add flourishes of genuine Xer dialogue—succinctly captures the importance of the discursive link between Gen X subcultural identity and the trope of the spectator. Sacks recounts the scene thus:

Picture this: the fate of the Earth depends on a young radio technician re-establishing the submarine’s communication with the outside world. Denzel Washington (the sub’s heroic executive officer who challenges the authority of “This is the Captain” Gene Hackman), employs the following, quintessential postmodern tactic. In order to make the consequences of not fixing the radio “real” for the technician, Denzel tells the young man to think of him (Denzel) as Captain Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise*, and pretend that Kirk has given him an order to fix the radio, or else billions of people will

die. Of course, the young man who watched *Star Trek* growing up can fully relate to the fictional image of Captain Kirk a lot more than to his own executive officer and the all-too-real consequences of failure. And so the technician hops to it, sweating profusely, gets that damned radio fixed, and the world is saved. (*Generation X Goes to College* 119)

In this example, it is the young man’s spectatorship, in the guise of an implied enthusiasm for *Star Trek*, that allows him to apprehend his “real” situation. The implication, of course, is that the Xer technician—and, by extension, Generation X as a whole—is more comfortable dealing with mediated “fantasy” than with “reality.” He must refer to his own spectatorship—visualize himself within the *mise-en-scène* of a *Star Trek* episode—in order to apprehend his immediate reality. Such a notion reverses the commonsense assumption that rigidly opposes spectatorship to reality—that is, the notion of a cinematic or televisual spectator as one who, by definition, escapes reality and indulges in fantasy. For the technician, spectatorship emerges not as something that defers or resists reality but as something on which reality—indeed, the fate of humankind—fundamentally depends. Moreover, while spectatorship is usually conceived of as something that inhibits action, in this instance it is the spectatorship of the Xer technician that releases him from paralysis and allows him to perform his job.

In the final analysis, therefore, Gen X spectatorship saves the day. Before that, however, it emerges as a pathological trait that the canny Denzel Washington character must negotiate. Likewise, in the mainstream media discourse on Gen X, the particular set of viewing practices I have designated here as Gen X spectatorship are often marked as pathological, in contrast to a normative mode of watching that is usually associated with the recent historical past. Gen Xers are variously shown to lack the proper affective response to what they watch, fail to distinguish between good and bad viewing, spend too much time as spectators rather than as actors, are excessively cynical in their attitude to what they watch (yet are also too easily seduced by what they watch), and rely excessively on what they watch rather than what they experience. Peter Sacks’s complaint about his Xer students typifies the characterization of Gen X spectatorship as deviant: “I quickly found that my

students, who had learned to count and spell from Big Bird and Grover, didn't want me—a real live mortal—for a teacher. They wanted an entertainer. They preferred a video image to flesh-and-blood reality. I couldn't compete with the noisy, glitzy spectacle of sounds and images that my students had grown used to in popular culture" ("No . . . Generation X Is Not Ok" 46). The assumption common to both *Crimson Tide* and Peter Sacks is the notion that Gen X spectatorship functions according to an alternative, alien logic. For instance, following the episode of mass murder at Columbine High School by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, voices in the media isolated the problem in the perverse spectatorial practices of contemporary white middle-class youth. It was said that Gen Xers Harris and Klebold were pathologically absorbed in the violent imagery of films and video games to the point where they could not distinguish between fantasy and reality. Conservative journal the *National Review* typified the discourse on Gen X spectatorship when it suggested, apropos the Columbine massacre, that the standard Xer "knows how to tune in almost anything projected on a two-dimensional screen, and tune out almost everything real. The default setting on late-model adolescents is 'entertain me.' . . . It's easy to slip into an I-am-watching-myself-on-television trance, to drift away from the here and now, to freeze out the suffering of your schoolmates . . . if you've had enough practice flipping the remote control" (Long). If spectatorship represents the terrain on which Generation X is attacked, it is also the ground from which defenses have been launched. In the many recent pro-Gen X and proyouth films marketed toward a younger demographic, young characters are often marked by an innate visual literacy—an ability to read advertising, TV, and film texts. This literacy is lacking in their elders, who emerge, comparatively speaking, as credulous and dim-witted consumers of visual texts. In *Home Alone*, for instance, the child-hero Kevin uses then-current 1980s technology such as the VCR and tape deck to successfully dupe the adult criminals trying to gain entry to his house. In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* the adolescent protagonist employs a similar scheme by using his synthesizer to fool his parents into thinking he is lying sick in bed. Likewise, in *Reality Bites* the cultural tastes of the young Gen X character Lelaina are favorably contrasted with the awful TV show on which she works and that is targeted toward much older viewers. In

order to see how the competing discourses of "media" and "reality" are negotiated within Gen X subjectivity, I wish to focus on a piece of cinema now inexorably tied with the notion of Gen X—*Reality Bites*.

Media and Reality in *Reality Bites*

Released in 1994, *Reality Bites*—directed by Ben Stiller—was a box-office success in a period that saw the release of a number of notable films arranged around the idea of "youth" (albeit in very different manners), including Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), Larry Clark's *Kids* (1995), and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994). As well as being a commercial success, the mainstream media overwhelmingly declared it to be an artistic one. Released as it was in the midst of media excitement over the idea of Generation X, many felt it was an accurate document of the Gen X subculture. According to Desson Howe, reviewing the film for the *Washington Post*, "*Reality Bites* sings, jokes and dances to the culture of the so-called post-baby boomer. . . . By aiming specifically—and accurately—at characters in their twenties, [the filmmakers] achieve something even greater: They encapsulate an era" (72).

By way of contrast to the U.S. mainstream media, the nominally "underground" media detested the film for its attempt to commercialize the Gen X zeitgeist. According to one reviewer, "[A]ll I've heard about this film lead [*sic*] me to believe it would be some sort of anthem to those 'coming of age' in the late 80s/early 90s. Well that's not what it was to me. My guess is that it's what someone older might *think* that anthem should be like. . . . And if this film were my reality, I'd agree that it bites" (Pali). For the voices of U.S. alternative niche media, *Reality Bites* marked the recuperation into the mainstream of the alternative aesthetic of more "authentic" cultural artifacts. Chuck Kleinhans, for instance, viewed "the star-powered *Reality Bites*" as a "less imaginative, less politically committed, and less interesting 'Hollywood copycat' of *Slacker*" (324). Indeed, the cinema of Generation X walked a fine line between being seen in the alternative and/or youth media as either authentic or simply a marketing ploy. The low-budget independent films *Clerks* and *Slacker* were given the nod as having "cred" (i.e., credibility), while the big-budget major-studio *Reality Bites* was dismissed (Vincenti; Pali). Indeed, the theme of "cred" was a strong one also *within*



Figure 1. In *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures), valedictorian Lelaina Pierce (Winona Ryder) gives a pro-Generation X speech.

Gen X visual and music culture. In *Reality Bites* the main character's principal concern is whether or not she is "selling out" by having her documentary aired on a crass MTV-style channel, while Cameron Crowe's *Singles* (1992) foregrounds the cred-obsessed anguish of an alternative musician. Likewise, Richard Linklater's *SubUrbia* (1997) unfolds as a philosophical dialogue on the implications of success when a "sell-out" musician returns to his home town to visit his old school friends. The dialectic of "popularity" and "authenticity" (interchangeable with "media" and "reality," respectively) is indeed a popular one within the cinematic representations of Gen X. In many cases the Xer protagonist flirts with the temptation of popularity, only to return, by the end of the film, to the moral high ground of impoverished authenticity. Significantly, I would suggest, the characters who represent the morally dangerous threat of inauthenticity—for instance, Ben Stiller's TV executive in *Reality Bites* and the sell-out musician in *SubUrbia*—always seem to be representatives of the media and/or entertainment industries. More will be said later on this dialectic between "media" and "authenticity," particularly in its significance to *Reality Bites*.

The film itself concerns the lives of four twenty-something young adults living in Houston, Texas (which, along with Seattle, was considered a nucleus of alternative youth subcultures at the time). The film starts right after the four graduate from college and tracks their attempts to either insert themselves into or desperately evade the

"grown-up" world of full-time employment. The first thing one notices about the film—and which many have noticed—is the degree to which it ardently attempts to address itself to the eighteen-to-twenty-five demographic, according to the readily available set of markers and codes with which the media had recently begun to designate that group. In the opening scene, set at a college graduation ceremony, valedictorian Lelaina Pierce (Winona Ryder) delivers a speech that seems to have come straight out of a pro-Gen X tract like *The GenX Reader* or *Revolution X*. Attacking "the generation that came before us" (i.e., baby boomers), Lelaina defiantly announces that members of "her generation" aren't interested in working eighty-hour weeks so they can afford to buy BMWs. The use of such inflammatory rhetoric clearly signals the film's aspiration—identical to the aspiration of books like *The GenX Reader*—to simultaneously speak for and produce a constituency called Generation X.

The aesthetic vocabulary of *Reality Bites* relies on a veritable archive of visual and media culture. The film attempts to address a Gen X spectator by positioning its assumed audience in relation to the flood of pop-culture reference points that dominate much of the film—for instance, an entire scene written around the forty-ounce Big Gulp. In the words of Bill Salzman, "[*Reality Bites* Director, Ben] Stiller assumes an audience which has been well-trained by the media. The privileged viewer must relate to the Xer identity and be accustomed to symbolic shorthand of film and advertising. . . . 'Getting' *Reality Bites* represents a culmination of years of media training."

My contention here is that this particular positionality with regard to popular/visual/media culture—affected by "years of media training" and enacted within *Reality Bites*—is not simply an attribute to be lazily ascribed to "actual" Gen Xers but defines the term as such. According to traditional subcultural theory, youth subcultures differentiate themselves from the hegemonic culture through their organization of "spectacle"—that is, the way in which they deploy visual markers constitutive of a recognizable subcultural "style." However, in a society that, as Guy Debord has famously argued, is itself organized as spectacle, I follow commentators such as Simon Frith and Celia Lury in arguing that youth subculture in general—even the category of "youth" itself—might be usefully redefined as "spectatorship" rather than as



Figure 2. After graduation, the group of friends sing “Conjunction Junction” on a rooftop in *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures).

“spectacle.” Following this argument, the category of “youth” may have come to designate not a collection of actually existing subjects but a set of (viewing) practices.

For David Cannon, what gives Generation X its specificity is the fact that its identity coagulates around a particular experience of popular culture in a media-saturated world. Cannon writes, “[D]escribed by some as the first global generation, they are joined together not by a common ideology but rather a sophisticated knowledge of consumer products” (2). Celia Lury suggests, “In this [media-saturated] environment, young people are principally defined as an audience.” Moreover, “it is the distinctive activities of young people as members of an audience that marks them out as young” (Lury 218, emphasis added). Following such an argument to its logical conclusions, Simon Frith, in the context of an analysis of U.K. television programming in the 1980s, has declared that “[i]n this model ‘youth’ became a category constructed by TV itself, with no other referent: those people of whatever age or circumstances who watched ‘youth’ programmes became youth. ‘Youth,’ in this account, no longer describes a particular type of viewer, who is attracted to a particular type of program but, rather, describes an attitude, a particular type of viewing behaviour” (75, emphasis added). Such a critical move signals a shift away from viewing “youth” (or, in my

analysis, Generation X) as a concrete collection of individuals and more as a performative subjectivity, that is, a category of historically enabled behavioral norms, linked in this case to visual culture.

According to J. P. Telotte, cult-film spectators differentiate themselves from the mainstream through acts of film spectatorship as performance. For Telotte, the cult is “a longing to *express* the self, to express difference” (12). According to Brett Farmer, who extends the description to include gay spectatorship, this type of spectatorship might be described as “identificatory performativity,” that is, a spectatorship that is “essentially performative in nature” and is “a practice through which the cultist performs his or her ‘difference’ from the mainstream” (29). What is theoretically crucial here is that through the act of spectatorship, cult spectators *produce* as well as *express* their difference. To put it another way, cult spectators go to cult films because they are cult spectators, and yet they are cult spectators because they go to cult films. Cult and/or gay spectators thus *rely* on cult films for their very identity, since their identity cannot be constituted in isolation from the texts that define it.

For Telotte and Farmer, “identificatory performativity” describes cult and gay spectatorships, respectively. I want to suggest that it also holds for the spectatorial formation of the Gen X subculture. For this reason, I define



Figure 2. In *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures) the friends sit around talking about the TV show *Good Times*.

Generation X as a spectatorship—that is, as the point of contact between subjects and texts. Gen X spectatorship, I would argue, marks the historical reification of spectatorship to the level of subjectivity. The characters in *Reality Bites*, I would argue, make this theoretical proposition perfectly apparent—even when they are not participating in actual spectatorship, they are still defined by the trope of the “spectator” or, in other words, by their relationship to contemporary media culture.

According to *Reality Bites*, being part of Generation X is seen to fundamentally hinge upon performing a particular spectatorial relationship toward popular culture. At the most manifest level, the four main Gen X characters—Troy, Lelaina, Vicki, and Sammy—are shown to be constantly watching TV. Moreover, even when they are not actively watching TV, they always seem to be somehow engaged by their spectatorship. Their conversation and other social interaction rely to a remarkable extent upon references to TV, film, and advertising. In the opening scene, the four main characters happily sing the 1970s children’s TV theme song “Conjunction Junction,” and when Troy moves in with the other characters, he is welcomed by new flatmates aping the rhetoric of advertising: “Welcome to the maxi pad with new dry weave. It actually pulls moisture away from you.” Douglas Coupland calls this tendency “O’Propriation,” that is, “the inclusion of advertising, packaging, and en-

tertainment jargon in everyday speech for ironic and/or comic effect” (107).

Within the logic of *Reality Bites*, I would suggest that it is the specificity of this relationship between the subject and consumer culture that constitutes the subject as being of Generation X. In one important scene, several of the main characters, along with sundry friends, are grouped in the lounge room of their share-house, fondly reminiscing about old episodes of the U.S. TV sitcom *Good Times* with an attitude that is simultaneously ironic and mocking yet also deeply nostalgic and affectionate. Michael Grates (director Ben Stiller), a wealthy TV executive (in other words, a yuppie), enters the room and attempts to participate in the conversation but clumsily fails to exhibit the right attitude of ironic disattachment. The “authentic” Xers in the room stare blankly at him, making it clear that he “doesn’t get it”—in other words, that he fails to participate fully in the spectatorial practices of the Gen X subculture. Later in the film, Michael himself acknowledges this fact, noting that he “do[es]n’t know the secret handshake” of Xer coolness.

Indeed, throughout the film, the character of Michael Grates constantly marks the point of comparison for the more privileged mode of engagement with visual culture demonstrated by the Gen X characters. When Michael is attempting to woo Lelaina, he plays the desperately “uncool” 1970s album *Frampton Comes Alive* by



Figure 4. In *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures), Michael admits to Troy (Ethan Hawke) that he does not “get it.”

Peter Frampton, and when he is trying to give confidence to Lelaina he says, with absurd earnestness, “Who’s the boss, huh? Tony Danza? No. It’s you.” Michael’s stance toward popular culture is pictured as too earnest and lacking in irony, as in his nerdy, fetishistic attitude toward *Planet of the Apes* paraphernalia. While he earnestly invests too much in popular culture, however, he simultaneously fails to invest enough. When Lelaina trusts him with her earnest and heartfelt video documentary of her friends, he treats it with disdain. Indeed, his position as a TV executive marks him as someone who regards pop culture as a site of profit making rather than a source of joy, as it frequently is for the Gen X characters.

Most often, the yuppie character is unfavorably compared to Ethan Hawke’s “slacker” character of Troy, who represents a substitute for Generation X in general. Troy’s brand of nonchalant, intellectual yet lowbrow cynicism is constantly placed in opposition to Michael’s earnest demeanor. Troy is presented as a young man of great intellect (sitting in a coffee shop, he casually flicks through Heidegger’s *Being and Time*), yet who, having dropped out of his philosophy course, is paralyzed by apathy and cynicism. As an “authentic” youth subcultural figure (he plays in an alternative rock band called Hey That’s My Bike), he emerges as the ultimate victim of the hegemonic recuperation and incorporation accomplished by yuppie MTV executives like Michael. Troy’s

particular brand of spectatorship positions him as an avid, obsessive lover of pop culture yet who—unlike Michael—is intellectually “above” it. To again quote from Douglas Coupland, Troy’s spectatorial activities show him to be an aficionado of “Recreational Slumming: The practice of participating in recreational activities of a class one perceives as lower than one’s own” (113).

Constantly lounging on the couch, Troy seems to gaze on the entire world as if it were a TV show, opting to watch—and make sarcastic comments—rather than participate. Even though, for much of the film, his father is perilously close to death as a result of prostate cancer, Troy can scarcely muster the appropriate affective commitment—the personification of what Fredric Jameson has termed “the waning of affect” in postmodern culture (11). Troy qua Generation X takes the model of spectatorship appropriate for watching a vulgar TV show and turns it into a way of being-in-the-world, of relating to reality as such. For Troy’s hypercynical spectatorial posture, social reality is so penetrated by “artificial” media and consumerism that no privileged ground exists from which to distinguish between the two. Troy’s mode of spectatorship suggests that contemporary social reality may perversely depend on a prior reference to a cinematic or televisual modality in order to constitute itself. In other words, reality is a product of spectatorship. Timothy Murray in *Like a Film* has argued this precise



Figure 5. Lelaina documents her friends' lives with her video camera in *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures).



Figure 6. An example of conspicuous product placement in *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures).

point, suggesting that in the late twentieth century the “cinematic” is a privileged mode through which reality is apprehended—it is reality itself that is “like a film,” hence the title of the book.

Indeed, I would argue that the narrative of *Reality Bites* is structured by a constant dialectical movement between the two pillars of “reality” and “media.” This tension only appears to resolve itself at the conclusion of the film. While mainstream media accounts of Generation X tend to denigrate Xers for their perverse attachment to fantasy instead of reality, in *Reality Bites* the hierarchy implicit in this critique is occasionally reversed. Fantasy often appears to be ranked above reality, hence the title of the film (“reality bites” can be translated as “reality sucks”). Likewise, when Lelaina is sacked from her job, she asks, “Why can’t things just go back to normal at the end of the half hour, like on *The Brady Bunch*?” Reality is compared to mediated fantasy and is found to be deficient. A fundamental continuity between reality and mediated fantasy is hinted at, whereby the former emerges as merely a degraded subset of the latter.

At some points in the film, mediated fantasy emerges as a support or guarantee of reality. Throughout the film, the action is interspersed with clips from the video documentary Lelaina is making about her circle of friends. Whenever something shocking or significant (i.e., “real”) happens in their lives, Lelaina immediately produces her video camera, and the film switches to handheld camera mode. This sudden change immediately makes the viewer

acutely aware of the presence of the camera. Far from undermining the impression of reality, however, it merely serves to underscore the “reality” of what is occurring on-screen. In this instance, reality seems perversely to rely on the exaggerated framing effect of the cinematic or televisual mode. Likewise, director Ben Stiller has argued that the innumerable product placements in the film actually enhance and sustain its “reality” effect. Multitudes of consumer items make prominent appearances, from Snickers, to BMW, to Camel cigarettes, to NutraSweet. As one Internet critic sarcastically remarked of the extensive use of product placements within *Reality Bites*, “Save your money on this one. You might need it to go shopping” (Vincenti). When product placement began in the 1950s, TV shows such as *I Love Lucy* would grind to a halt while Lucille Ball heaped praise on a washing powder or cigarette brand. Such a clumsy device no doubt had the consequence of rupturing the reality effect of the show. With regard to *Reality Bites*, however, director Stiller argues, no doubt correctly, that if he had either avoided using consumer products altogether or else used fictional consumer products, this would have ruptured the reality effect for his intended viewers, who are bombarded with thousands of mediated brand images every day (Salzmann).

At other points in *Reality Bites*, however, the category of “media” emerges not as a support of reality but as that which thwarts or prevents reality from fully coming into being. For instance, the narrative is driven by the unspoken romantic bond between Lelaina and Troy.



Figure 7. In *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures), Troy tells Lelaina that he loves her, then begins to laugh.

However, whenever it threatens to come to the surface and become real, one of the characters (usually Troy) causes it to dissipate with a sarcastic comment, usually drawn from media discourse. At one point he cradles Lelaina's face in his hands, stares into her eyes, and says, "I am really in love with you." He then begins to giggle, obviously amused by the words he has just spoken, which seem to have come from a tacky TV soap opera. Jedediah Purdy in *For Common Things* describes this uniquely contemporary experience in the following way: "[W]e can have no intimate moment, no private words of affection, empathy, or rebuke that we have not seen pronounced on a thirty-foot screen before an audience of hundreds. . . . They are superficial, they belong to other people and other purposes; they are not ours" (12).

Of course, the affective charge of Troy's words is immediately thwarted by his calculated self-mockery. Douglas Coupland has given this apparently universal Gen X tendency the name "Derision Preemption," that is, "[a] life-style tactic; the refusal to go out on any sort of emotional limb so as to avoid mockery from peers" (150). The characters of *Reality Bites*—most especially the cynical slacker, Troy—employ derision preemption as a matter of course. When asked to describe his delight when Vicki is promoted, Troy stares blankly and drawls, "I'm bursting with fruit flavor," and when Lelaina bashfully admits that her career goal is, ultimately, to "make a difference in people's lives," Troy replies that he "would like to buy them all a Coke."

Spectatorship thus often emerges as that which stops something from happening, stops reality from fully emerging, stops anything from being "really real." In the case of Troy and Lelaina, sarcasm and self-referentiality obstruct the natural trajectory of desire for the majority of the film. Even when Troy says directly to Lelaina, "I am really in love with you," there always lingers the suspicion that he is merely quoting with irony from some cheesy media source. Indeed, there is always something impeding the kind of Habermasian ideal speech situation in which each subject can fully articulate his or her desire, and this "something" is always metonymically related to a phony and artificial consumer culture in which the subjects are embedded. At the end of the film, however, the dialectical tension between reality and media magically resolves itself in classical Hollywood tradition. Troy's father dies, and when he returns from the funeral, his speech is unusually earnest, direct, and free of derision preemption. He and Lelaina are suddenly able to articulate their desire directly and without impediment. Indeed, the scene is notable for the fact that it is the quietest one in the entire film and that it is one of only a handful of scenes set outside. While the other such scenes are set in the bustling cityscape, Troy and Lelaina's earnest conversation takes place near trees and grass, far away—geographically and conceptually—from the TV set and friends discussing TV shows and hence, to borrow from Don DeLillo, far from the white noise of media culture that otherwise derails and overwhelms their communication.

A number of film critics have suggested that the resolution of *Reality Bites* renders the film an artistic failure. The use of the heterosexual romance as a device for resolving the narrative gives the film a fundamental continuity with the earliest examples of the classical Hollywood style, heavily ironic for a film that clearly aspires to construct a sense of "difference" from mainstream sensibilities and also one that assumes spectators to be as media savvy as *Reality Bites* does. As one disappointed Internet critic declared, "[I]t lacks any semblance of originality. Beneath a thin veneer of style lie buried all the old clichés and formulas of typical romantic comedies" (Berardinelli). By comparison to a film like *Slacker*, which refuses any notion of orthodox narrative, or *Clerks*, in which irony sabotages every attempt at narrative closure, *Reality Bites* appears remarkably conventional and conservative.



Figure 8. Lelaina and Troy come together in *Reality Bites* (Universal Pictures).

Indeed, I also would locate the much-discussed “failure” of *Reality Bites* in the penultimate scene when Troy and Lelaina declare their love; by enacting a fantasy of life without mediation, the film sabotages its own intention to authentically represent Generation X. It ultimately arrives at an endorsement of the mainstream conservative position, which holds that Xers can and should recant their “choice” of pathological spectatorship and enter into the Real World (represented in this instance by a heterosexual relationship). Indeed, this logic is inscribed into the very narrative. When the film activates the fantasy of life without mediation by disembedding the narrative from visual culture and the spectatorial relationship, it suddenly loses its specificity as being a Gen X film. Thus, in the penultimate scene, when Troy and Lelaina finally surpass irony and sarcasm and become a couple in love, it is clear that they have in some sense become something other than Gen

Xers: mature adults, model citizens, heteronormative hegemonic subjects. In the final scene, Lelaina and Troy are seen lounging in their home, and, for the first time in the film, the TV is conspicuously switched off and the lounge room is not clogged up with friends discussing pop culture trivia. Instead, they are the model of middle-class, suburban-dwelling normativity, and their radical Gen X days are clearly behind them. I take this as an illustration of my argument that Gen X subcultural identity can be apprehended as a spectatorship. To put it simply, when the manifestations of spectatorship are removed from Troy and Lelaina’s lives, they palpably cease to resemble Gen Xers. *Reality Bites* thus arrives at something of an endorsement of the mainstream media’s denigration of Generation X as preferring fantasy to the Real World. By the end of the movie, it seems implicit that Troy and Lelaina have transcended Generation X—matured—and taken a dose of reality.

Conclusion

According to Jim Collins, the 1990s saw the emergence of two new genres of Hollywood cinema: “eclectic irony” and the “new sincerity” (276). For Collins, the former category (for instance, *Pulp Fiction* and *Austin Powers*) involves layers upon layers of referentiality and “ironic hybridization,” while the latter category (for instance, *Dances with Wolves* and *Field of Dreams*) “rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity” (276). I would suggest that *Reality Bites* marks the point where Collins’s two categories come together—where self-referentiality and irony are mobilized toward achieving lost purity. That is, although the film employs endless self-referentiality and irony, diegetically embedded as it is within contemporary media society, this environment provides the necessary point from which the Gen X characters yearn for something else—a place where the sarcasm, irony, cynicism, and apathy of contemporary consumer society may disappear and return them to their “lost purity.” However, as my reading of the film demonstrates, such a critical move is not without risks. When Troy and Lelaina reach out for this lost purity, they cannot do so with their Gen X identity still intact.

The narrative of the film functions as an allegory for those who prefer their subcultures to be far removed from mediation and incorporation. As my reading of the film demonstrates, once mediation is removed, subcultural identity collapses. To treat Gen X subcultural identity as performative—in other words, as a set of spectatorial practices—is to recognize the inescapable fact that mediation is always already at play in the constitution of contemporary subcultural identity. While some commentators complained about the imposition upon an “authentic” Generation X subculture that *Reality Bites* represented, it should be remembered that the category of Generation X effectively did not exist prior to *Reality Bites*. It was the film itself that provided the occasion for the performance of Gen X identity. While commentators clamored to declare *Reality Bites*’s representation of Gen X as wrong, inaccurate, and irrelevant to the experience of “actual” Gen Xers, the film has tellingly remained a strong historical reference point for those attempting to delineate Xer identity, irrespective of whether they agree or disagree with the film’s representations. The question of representational accuracy—of the “real” Gen X subculture versus its

“artificial” representations—thus seems somewhat beside the point once it becomes clear that *Reality Bites* is, in effect, historically *constitutive* of Gen X identity rather than a mere document. The boundaries between “media” and “reality” are, in this instance, profoundly fuzzy.

My argument here has been that to approach Generation X as a spectatorship is to approach it not as an already constituted identity but as the interface between “subject” and “text.” A critical move such as this acknowledges the presence of mediation in contemporary subcultural formations and thus moves beyond the tendency within much subcultural theory to view media incorporation as inherently destructive of subcultures. My account of the media representations of Generation X helps to counter this approach by suggesting that media—even mass media—performs the crucial function of opening a space for subcultures to emerge. Thus, while Generation X started as a pure product of media discourse, the Gen X media craze created a space for more “authentic” versions of Xer subcultural identity to emerge. While I have focused on media representations alone, I believe further work on the Gen X subculture needs to incorporate different approaches. I believe, for instance, that ethnographic research should be conducted in order to determine the way in which those targeted by media representations—that is, “actual” Gen Xers, young people in general—approach the version of subcultural identity proliferated through the media. The point here is not to privilege actually existing subcultures over their media representations but to apprehend the way in which media representations are put to use by their “targets” and turned into new identities, in other words, the way in which a “false” and “phony” media-constructed identity is received and even turned against itself into something authentic.

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