

Worse & Worse

by John Zerzan

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The atrocities typical of advanced capitalism/advanced civilization seem as pronounced here in Eugene, Oregon, as elsewhere. ``Teenage Suicides Rocket'' proclaimed the local front page in September (1993), explaining that the rate of teen self-destruction in Oregon has increased 600% over the past 30 years. November found a man in the adjacent town of Springfield suffocating his toddler daughter, then burning himself to death with gasoline. He'd had a history of violence, but neighbors considered theirs a ``quiet, church-going family." Freud's prediction that in time everyone will be made neurotic by civilization's power to deny fulfillment is beginning to look like too rosy a take on the future. In society at large a breakdown can be seen unfolding in every area of life. The federal Education Department in September unveiled a study depicting almost half of all adults as functionally illiterate. As in cannot read or write, cannot cope with the minimum requirements of industrial life. This kind of fundamental turn-off makes the fact that now no-one puts any stock in politicians seem trivial. Soon, apparently, a majority will be dependent on Prozac (``the hottest psychiatric drug in history") or other anti-depressants, not to mention how widespread is the use of heroin and cocaine. River Phoenix died of too much of the latter drugs on Halloween, prompting his publicist to muse, ``It leaves you to question why are young people compelled to do this?"

Meanwhile, as if rehearsing for the growing mayhem at large, the video games to which pre-teen boys are addicted embody a noticeably escalating violence. At the end of October a score of devastating Southern California fires mostly the work of arsonists grabbed national headlines for several days. Two weeks later Clinton decried the ``great crisis of the spirit" in America, in lamenting the war-zone nature of inner cities.

Science News for September 25 disclosed two studies linking workplace stress and cancer. There were 6,000 on-the-job fatalities in 1992, but the word is getting out that in fact work kills virtually everyone. An existence defined by working

and paying has never produced such a sense of barrenness and even fear, for which the numbing sterility and homogeneity of consumer malls stand as perfect landmarks.

The generalized culture we label postmodern, with its trademark refusal to look at the whole of this horror show, reaches its appropriate level with the moronism of Beavis and Butthead. A cynical, know-nothing stance only prompts new levels of stupidity and denial. In this way the crisis of the education system and what stands behind it can be better understood: it is not so much the function of the totality to instill conformist convictions as it is to destroy the capacity to form any.

Can everyday life really be enacted on this basis much longer? Support for such a ghastly, immiserating set-up is eroding, but not nearly fast enough.