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# Deconstructing Surveillance Pedagogy: Dead Poets Society

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# Deconstructing Surveillance Pedagogy: Dead Poets Society

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DECONSTRUCTING SURVEILLANCE PEDAGOGY:  
*DEAD POETS SOCIETY*

In a metacommentary, we don't theorize postmodernism so much as we map the necessary conditions for the standard thought on postmodernism: why has it become so necessary to talk about a postmodern condition, what needs does that talking fulfill? The question then is not so much about the referents of postmodern discourse—what the postmodern condition is, and whether the discourse has described that condition correctly—but about what that discourse enables, and how it functions. (Stam 50)

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. (Foucault 138)

I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately.  
I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life!  
To put to rest all that was not life  
And not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.  
(Thoreau)

The current postmodern condition strongly suggests that reculturation is an important focus for educational reform. In particular, critical theories enable educators to question for the "first time," the differential incorporation of high and popular culture in schools. Critical theories encourage us to identify the repressed margins of unofficial cultures, to name the struggles within the lifeworld of subaltern groups, and to legitimate the silenced culture of the popular in the attempt to subvert the prevailing structures of power and authority associated with high academic culture. However, if we observe course offerings in schools of education—especially in teacher preparation programs—we find that not much about popular culture is taken seriously in schools. Studying it in classrooms is considered an illegitimate and ill-conceived use of pedagogical means by many educators. Popular cultural "texts" are often deemed non-academic and unworthy of scholarly pursuit, and people too closely associated with them are quickly dismissed as being indiscriminating and common. There are stratifications within popular culture as well. For example, films are usually considered inferior to books. There is a valorization of the written, as opposed to the spoken, word. As a result, when films are used in schools, they are often used as academic fillers, brain candy, or an electronic coping strategy when substitute teachers entertain students for a few days. Films are seen as effective pedagogical

cal instruments to “take up time,” as simple diversions, or as “special schedule” activities. Rarely do they receive extensive critique by students or are legitimated as evidence to support historical arguments (Cohen). For these reasons and many more, popular culture, and in particular, film, become even more important for critical educators to engage. How students live “the popular” receives little attention in schools of education. As a result, students are denied the opportunity to learn how their identities have been constituted and shaped by quotidian forces and relations both ideological and material. Without the pedagogical space for critical dialogue about the semiotics of the everyday and what Michel Foucault refers to as the “political anatomy” of film, educators rob students of potentially transformative ways they can understand their everyday lives and work strategically toward interrogating them for hegemonic relations as well as emancipatory spaces. Through our critical analysis of the film, *Dead Poets Society*, we argue that understanding popular culture must become an integral part of any critical education if students are expected to understand their location within the global economy and their position relative to local vectors of power and privilege.

At this juncture, some definitions are warranted. For clarification, we adopt Henry Giroux and Roger Simon’s statement about the status of popular culture in schools: “The dominant discourse still defines popular culture as whatever remains when high culture is subtracted from the overall totality of cultural practices. It is seen as the trivial and the insignificant of everyday life, and usually it is a form of popular taste deemed unworthy of either academic legitimation or high social affirmation” (238). Because educators privilege high culture at the expense of popular culture and thus excuse the popular in one sweeping stroke, students and educators forego the benefit of critically analyzing larger systems of social relations and entrenched interests which inform popular culture. Ironically, these are the systems of meaning many students take with them to classrooms and through which they act. Furthermore, research failing to attend to the social semiotics of the quotidian shows a certain bias against the “popular” and its low-brow mischief as well as a lack of engagement with “culture” in its specific articulations as opposed to Culture in its totalizing sense. We want to make clear that our interest in popular culture is not to exercise the fashionable apostasy of deconstructive analysis costumed in the academic salons of Paris. Rather, we analyze the ways in which education is not only embedded in its own institutional and pedagogical practices but also the ways in which it secures its very condition of existence by requiring people to be located within the social division of labor and the current practices of superexploitation linked to the globalization of capital.

John Storey locates the term “popular” in those cultural practices that have a strong presence in commercial culture. Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire situate “culture” as a historical site of struggle over the production of meaning (San Juan, Jr.; McLaren). Considered together, the work of Storey, Gramsci, and Freire draw attention to an important political project: theorizing popular culture. For

us, such a project must involve a search for a radical theory that neither treats the masses as Adornian dupes of popular spectacles nor celebrates the popular as “authentic” folk culture created in a revolutionary mix from below (Giroux and Simon). In addition, a critical theory of everyday life must avoid a purely rational analysis of subject positions within the circuits of semiotic economies of images, as if audience response is a purely reasoned activity involving informed consent. Moreover, Giroux and Simon, following Grossberg, remind us that critical educators must work at deconstructing the ways students affectively invest in popular practices and texts. In an era characterized by the waning of affect, it becomes even more imperative to construct a critical theory of popular culture that works against the totalizing and eclipsing force of reason in its monolithic sense.

For us, a specific point of theoretical importance in analyzing the popular is the way in which the body is portrayed in popular films. Films often oppose the carceral’s ephemeral images with rationality’s ethereal themes, favoring the latter. The body represents the site of desire, sexuality, and pleasures. In mainstream culture, somatic experimentations such as body piercing and painting become deviant symptoms of a mind gone awry. Current developments in technology, media, and marketing slogans abound on the importance of using the mind. For what exact purpose beyond exercising the mind, we are rarely told. For the capitalist class, it seems enough to announce that the mind should not be wasted. Educational propaganda about the need to use our minds is perhaps a telling sign of what Jean Baudrillard would likely suggest is an “alibi” for the general mindlessness in social life. People do not lack mindful activity; rather, there is an overabundance to the point that it loses its specificity from that which we consider physical. To enter the debate around the mind-body split, we must first come to grips with what we mean by “mental” (Rorty). More important, intellectual labor for its own sake is never justifiable without attempting to grasp the often myriad interests that such labor serves. In our own classroom teaching we have come to understand that students benefit from discursive strategies which offer a theory of subjectivity as well as educational practices that recognize them as subjects. In short, becoming a student in the Gramscian sense of having a phronetic mind and a revolutionary disposition toward the body is a political project that can potentially transform our notions of what it means to be an active agent of history that enunciates a pledge of emancipation in the face of current forms of capitalist superexploitation. Further, it points to the struggle for an altered historical reality where domination would cease to exist.

Appadurai notes that contemporary analysis of the body has revealed how the emotions and affect are not simply “raw, precultural materials that constitute a universal, transsocial substrate” (147) but rather are “culturally constructed and socially situated” (147). Sensory experience and bodily technique become, in this view, “parts of historically constituted regimes of knowledge and power” (147). The notion of “embodied experience” or “enfleshment” has emerged as a powerful conceptual tool to understand how bodily states and experiences of

the popular, and bodily techniques and affective dispositions are inscribed upon corporeal rituals of self control and discipline that serve through everyday popular practices the material interests of the nation-state (McLaren). How are individuals motivated as body subjects through cultural and political schema that have imprinted themselves on bodily experience? How are macroconceptions of civility and dignity constructed by interests and ideologies which in turn link language and representations to the world of emotion and affect (Appadurai)?

Understanding how popular culture has structured our ideas about the body is one way to theorize our everyday practices. A critical discourse that engages the concept of corporeality affirms the micro-politics of desire as it is articulated at the level of living in the flesh. Our perspective recognizes that the body must neither be essentialized nor immaterialized. Instead, the body is an effect of ideological and discursive processes, all of which overdetermine its formation at any one time. Thus, combating social incarceration of the body entails waging discursive battles on many fronts in order to avoid essentializing any one of its fields of articulation. This does not suggest a rejection of essentialist discourses *in toto*. Donna Haraway reminds us of the differences within essentialism. In particular, she encourages radical theorists to take up the challenge of biological feminists, especially their contribution to understanding the ways in which images of women's bodies have been used in social discourse. However, it should be clear that the body is not just an effect of discourse. Related to how the body is constructed in its specific fields are the material consequences accompanying the meanings we graft onto the body, which in turn begin physically to manifest themselves in our postures, speech, and movements: in short, our *habitus*. As opposed to a ludic interpretation of the body (i.e., viewing the body as a series of semiotic relations), we believe that material consequences follow from the regulation and appropriation of bodily techniques and dispositions which create different materialities for body subjects. Critical educators are interested in the body not only to reform our ideas about the body, but to re-form the body itself as a political space of agential power.

Pedagogically speaking, teaching popular culture in the classroom is as important as theorizing about it. Teaching popular culture is simultaneously a discourse and a practice. During classroom discussions, educators must recognize the element of student voice. Problematizing student experience is a way of cultivating student voice by inviting students to problematize the routines and rituals of their daily lives and to thematize the collective and singular events that shape their self-understanding and social dispositions. In doing so, Paulo Freire suggests using problem-posing pedagogical strategies. Problem-posing education is an activity that is conducted with students, not for them. By working with students, critical educators attempt to cultivate an ethics of collectivity. Building a community of learners opposes the totalizing effect of establishing unity. Community-building is a position guided by an ethics of solidarity which recognizes differences between people. It acknowledges the pressing need to take

active steps toward reconstituting the public sphere without imposing a “same page” ethos.

We recognize that popular culture consists of its own bodies of knowledge and codes of knowing found on street corners, playgrounds, and other embodied ways of living. In part, students invest in popular practices as a result of their oppositional character to academic life and their “wastefulness” in the Baudrillardian sense. Educators who expect full participation from students on the basis that popular culture is about them may be thwarted by moments of resistance from the students themselves. By sanctioning popular culture as a legitimate topic of study, educators are confronting one of the important meanings that students derive from participating in traditionally non-academic practices: their opposition to schooling. Educators risk colonizing student culture if they ignore the element of ownership. Of course essentialist ownership of popular culture must be guarded against as well. Students benefit from becoming more aware of the slippage of cultural autonomy. Popular culture is an amalgamation of hybrid practices, the original source of which escapes us.

Director Peter Weir’s film, *Dead Poets Society*, is a semiotically pregnant filmic text offering a powerful examination of the ways in which the body is schooled as well as transformed. During a summer course in educational foundations at UCLA where we co-taught a class of approximately thirty-five prospective elementary and secondary school teachers, we were able to use the film for textual analysis in conjunction with theoretical pieces of writing about popular culture. Students were encouraged to assess critically the film’s possibility as a critical pedagogical instrument. More important, we asked them to interrogate critically the film’s assumptions about the purpose of education as well as to problematize the film’s project with regards to the struggle over cultural politics. By and large, the students responded well to the film’s inclusion into the course syllabus. And with the benefit of critical readings on popular culture, students gained insight on the multivalenced ways subjectivities are constituted within everyday life. Without disparaging the important role that written texts play in teaching and learning, experimenting with traditional formats by including both a film and discussing theoretical expositions of popular culture enabled the class to envision relevant and embodied pedagogies.

The process of schooling reflects Plato’s concept of *idiopraein*, which is the process of harmonizing an individual’s talents and interests with the needs of the social whole or larger community. Each person is given his or her place in society and the better the fit the healthier the state. The social purpose of teaching is to bring about *idiopraein* (Blacker). In order to bring this about, Plato realized that select “guardians” would have to perpetuate the “noble lie” that some people are inherently superior to others (i.e., for Plato, this lie meant perpetuating the idea that some people are gold, silver, or bronze). We live in an era of free-market in which schools are designed to give people tradable skills that are intellectual or vocational. Schools are also designed to equip people with character traits such as competitiveness and acquisitiveness (Blacker). The

noble lie in this case is that only the “gold” people are destined to rise to the top of the capitalist ladder. The students of Welton represent the “gold” stratum of future corporate and professional leaders. The noble lie perpetuated by the teacher is that unquestioning obedience to authority and a slavish veneration of tradition are keys to success.

*Dead Poets Society* makes sincere attempts to fracture the hegemonic discourse of what the school administration in the film values as a pedagogy built on the pillars of “TRADITION, HONOR, DISCIPLINE, and EXCELLENCE.” Embodied in John Keating’s commitment to the search for a transgressive pedagogy and the students’ cry for “TRAVESTY, HORROR, DECADENCE, and EXCREMENT,” the film’s overt message resurrects the avatars of Romanticism by evoking the sign of *carpe diem*, or “seize the day.” In doing so, Keating, played by actor Robin Williams, encourages, better yet, makes it imperative for the Welton High School students to pursue education to the ends of self-actualization, existential freedom, and humanistic quest for peak experiences. For example, in one scene he mobilizes the students to tear out the pages from their poetry anthology, urging them to live the verse of life rather than simply read about it, albeit from someone else’s aesthetic vantage point. Keating’s progressive pedagogy is an unequivocal attempt to free students from the shackles of schooling for schooling’s sake in order to remind them of the richness in experience, the potential for passion, and the vitality in a life freed from a technicist mode of learning. However, critical interrogation of the film leads one to question the political project suggested by the encounter between Keating and the students. By emphasizing the cultivation of self, Keating’s humanistic discourse ultimately falls short of politicizing a collective project toward cultural emancipation. Although there is much in Keating’s pedagogy that is liberating, it lacks the politicized and self-reflexive discourse students need in order to combat the school’s reabsorption of their fleeting transgressions. Ultimately the school served as a flat, contiguous and homogeneous space that worked to produce a compliant national citizenry. Here students are produced within modes of subjectivity most congenial to the nation-state. Yet while the students resisted the normative charter of the school, there was little recognition in the film of the links between this charter and the manner in which schools perpetuate asymmetrical relations of power which in turn are linked to the larger social division of labor.

Keating’s intervention accomplishes its initial objective of stirring up an apparently stagnant school environment. He appropriates the discourse of *carpe diem* such that the body becomes a site of struggle. During his first day of teaching, Keating unsettles the scene by having the students follow him out into the hallway, thereby breaking the ostensible bondage between the students’ bodies and their seats. Foucault reminds us of the way the body is perfected by the architecture of surveillance. Indeed, Welton students initially hesitate to leave their antiseptic, regimented, and cellularized space, perhaps out of fear of the consequences for leaving their seats. This is auto-surveillance at



its most invisible. As Keating tempts the students to follow him into the hallway, they look at one another in puzzlement as if they do not own their bodies. The students seem to wait for a bell to signal their next move as it does so many times to signal the end of a class period, the same bell which tolls for Neil whose tragic death is only one of many deaths in the film. Eventually, the students rise from their seats and gingerly walk behind Keating into the cold hallway.

As Foucault has shown us, the present regime of discipline regimented the body's location, temporality, and behavior. In *Dead Poets Society*, Welton depotentiates the students' carnal possibilities by compartmentalizing and repeatedly sending them to their chairs, the symbolic chains of schooling. The classroom becomes a mirror of official society where resistance occurs in the cavities that separate the real from the possible. The classroom becomes the prison-house of knowledge, a site of the totalization of regulative functions, yet the site of unmarked possibility. As in the case of so many other schools, the classroom walls at Welton represent the lost horizon of possible worlds and the delimited text of freedom. Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines the prisoners' day from their rising from sleep at six in the morning, then accounting for approximately twenty-minute intervals and the activities accompanying them, until the inmates return to their cells at half past eight in the evening to return to sleep. Prison life ritualizes the inmates' bodies not only by assigning their stations at given intervals, but also by regulating a period of time for their body to be in certain locations. What results is a micro-technology of power that institutes spatio-temporal oppression.

In *Dead Poets Society* Welton ritualizes the student body by beginning the day with a lesson on poetry in the morning while sitting "properly" in their (apparently) assigned seats. This sets the tone for what the students can expect as normal usage of the body while learning: sitting quietly and speaking when asked to speak. Keating disrupts this arrangement by having the students follow him into the corridor, thereby transforming their potential energy into kinetic movement. Their bodies are made to relate to poetry under new circumstances by gazing at the pictures of former Welton students in the glass casing rather than being forced to engage a canonized classroom textbook. Keating's students set their poetry anthology aside and instead carry on a dialogue. Shumway explains the importance of such disciplinary controls:

The body for Foucault is not a euphemism for the sexual, and is only one aspect of the way the body is constructed in schooling. The body is used by Foucault to indicate the fact that disciplinary controls are not merely memorized and accepted, but actually form the body itself. One could say that they are habits in the sense that they work without the conscious choice of an individual but are ingrained in the very posture and musculature of the body. (227)

Keating unsettles the students' atomistic configuration by huddling them around in the hallway. There is tactile contact between them as their uniforms scratch against one another when they crowd around to stare at the hallway photographs. Keating encourages his students to look into past (and "dead") students' faces and identify themselves in the faces on the wall. The students stare at the Welton graduates only to find their own blank faces staring back at them in the reflections on the glass. At stake here is the moment of misrecognition, in the Lacanian sense, of locating identity in reflections other than ourselves because the students neither identify with the photographs of former students nor with their own reflections on the glass casing.

Contrast student reactivation of body zones in the hallway with their isolation from each other when sitting in their own chairs in the classroom. In the classroom, Welton student bodies are still close to the each other but maintain a critical distance that reinforces their alienation from one another. Such closeness at arm's length in the classroom reflects John Fiske's concept of "distantiation":

Such distance devalues socially and historically specific reading practices in favor of a transcendent appreciation or aesthetic sensibility with claims to universality . . . This distance from the historical is also a distance from the bodily sensations, for it is our bodies that finally bind us to our historical and social specificities. As the mundanities of our social conditions are set aside, or distanced, by this view of art, so, too, are the so-called sensuous, cheap, and easy pleasures of the body distanced from the more contemplative, aesthetic pleasures of the mind. (154)

Fredric Jameson explains postmodern distance this way:

Distance in general including critical distance in particular has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism. We are submerged in its henceforth filled and suffused volumes to the point where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distanciation. (Montag 94)

Our bodies expose the interests of bourgeois distantiation. Whereas bourgeois distance emphasizes a certain sacred individualism that escapes the other, the body reminds us of our physical propinquity to the other. It is the point where the self is confounded by the other and (mis)recognizes itself through the other. At this juncture in *Dead Poets Society* due to the students' increased proximity to one another, statements can be felt in people's breath, heard in the slightest whisper. "Carpe diem," Keating haunts as a student feels Keating's moist breath on his neck.

But make no mistake about it. In our current viral society, distance between host, or self, and parasite, or other, is preserved only to the point that self and other fail to connect. "Touch" is approached, but never accomplished. Critical

distance has been all but abolished in our tactile universe where Marshall McLuhan's dictum "the medium is the message" becomes "the massage" (Baudrillard 123–24). Closeness is achieved only asymptotically in order to maintain the enigma of chance:

In a sacred, ceremonial universe, things do not touch each other, and they never meet. They link up without fail, but without contact. Tact in this matter is precisely avoiding contact. Remark how ceremonial gestures, dress, and bodies roll, intertwine, brush past each other, challenge one another, but without ever touching. . . . The same is true for our bodies in everyday lives. . . . A very powerful force was required to break this magnetic distance where each body moves, as well as to produce this indifferent space where chance is able to put them in contact. (Baudrillard 146)

The bodies of Welton students do not occupy any safe space on their own or a safe landscape for the autonomous self. Critical distance does not exist at arm's length, as it were. An ecology of critical interviews between concrete voices is what remains. In this move from distantiation to implosion, the body represents what JoAnne Pagano refers to as our "radical nearness." Pagano turns the body's "attachments to the world" against the "fantasy of unfettered mind" (343). She affirms our libidinal connections which simultaneously "guarantee identity" (349) through differences between bodies. Pagano does not see the choice as merely either identity or consensus, but a critical hybrid of both difference and connection through the "specificity of the body" (352).

Keating assists in re-posturing the students' bodies in ways against which Welton's establishment has guarded. Whereas they sit robot-like with hands on their desks, with erect posture, and equidistant from one another, Keating's hallway huddles are more informal, disorganized, and flexible. Welton Academy rigidifies the body's demeanor; Keating uncoils it. Compare this with Foucault's description of embodied handwriting exercises in schools:

A well-disciplined body forms the operationalized context of the slightest gesture. Good handwriting, for example, presupposes a gymnastics—a whole routine whose rigorous code invests the body in its entirety, from the points of the feet to the tip of the index finger. The pupils must always "hold their bodies erect, somewhat turned and free on the left side, slightly inclined, so that, with the elbow placed on the table, the chin can be rested upon the hand, unless this were to interfere with the view; the left leg must be somewhat more forward under the table than the right. A distance of two fingers must be left between the body and the table. . . ." [But there is no need to go on.] (152)

At Welton, with class seats arranged in rows that are equidistant from one another and facing the front of the room, a teacher is able more efficiently to

supervise student bodies. Such a perfect arrangement of the room improves what Cohen refers to as a teacher's periscopic "supervision" and her technology of control.

Keating fractures Welton's surveillance pedagogy by holding class sessions in hallways, sport fields, and school quads. And when he conducts discussions in the classroom, for example, on the importance of poetry, he crouches on the ground whereas the students remain standing and looking downwards at him, thereby suggesting a disruption of their relationships vis-a-vis the body. As a result, the students are able to use the classroom as a space to experiment with what Nelson Goodman calls "ways of worldmaking." This intensifies in the scene where Keating encourages the students to stand atop the teacher's desk and take a moment to survey the room in order to see it—in a sense see the world—from a different perspective. In another outdoor scene, Keating asks the students to experiment with their style of walking in order to show "the dangers of conformity." At first the students walk like one another, almost in militia formation. Then prompted by Keating's suggestion, some students begin to strut, some wobble. Charlie sits this exercise out saying, "Exercising the right not to walk." By making the familiar strange, Keating begins the rudiments of a lesson on the unnaturalness of classroom settings, that is, its hierarchical spatial organization and centralized arrangement.

In light of Bakhtin's insights, we can think of the body as an ideological effect of language. The body becomes a sign in discourse and communicative exchanges. In reference to Bakhtin's notion of "tact," or the codes of dialogue, Stam writes:

In the sound film we not only hear the words with their accent and intonation, but witness the facial or corporeal expression which accompanies the words—the posture of arrogance or resignation, the raised eyebrow, the intimidating look, the ironic glance which modifies the ostensible meaning of an utterance. (125)

This analysis blurs the distinctions between what is cognitive and that which is bodily. Eyes speak volumes. Postures communicate emotion. Speech and the body conflate. A revolutionary discourse must not only liberate the mind, it must also de-colonize the body. Ideologically speaking, the body houses various social grammars and norms, not in their Durkheimian sense as accepted rules for conduct, but as discursive sites that are struggles over meaning in the Gramscian and Freirean sense.

Keating's somatic pedagogy re-molds the students' musculatures into a formation conducive to what Bakhtin refers to as a dialogical relationship. As such, Keating suggests that the body is social. It only gains recognition and more important, meaning, when juxtaposed with other bodies. Bodies, as it were, converse on the level of signs. Similarly, Fiske observes:

The body, its geography and history, are not empiricist facts in a Newtonian nature. Their natural essences are semiotically inert: they become epistemologically interesting only when they enter a social order, for only then do their differences become structured rather than essential; only a social order, therefore, can make differences signify. The concrete practices of everyday life are the insertion of the body into the social order, and, de Certeau would argue, the inscription of the social order upon that body. (163)

In *Dead Poets Society* we understand Todd Anderson's unwillingness to inject his body into class interactions and Dead Poets events in relation to more exoticized expressions of the "savage" body—e.g. Charlie Dalton. Charlie's "yawping" behavior sets the context for Todd's reluctance to let out a "barbaric Yawp" during Keating's class. A similar situation occurs during one of Keating's field exercises in a student's tentativeness to recite a line from a poem and his subsequent weak attempt to kick the soccer ball. A resounding "boo" from Keating results, strategically juxtaposed with Charlie bellowing "To indeed be a god!" and followed by his thundering kick at the next ball. "To indeed be a god!"—a sentiment fostered in Keating's teachings—is certainly one of the repressive myths of empire and Keating leaves such ideological impulses unchecked and left free to be cathected to any movement in search of gods to serve the empire or otherwise. Last, Knox's sexual repression in his pursuit of the virginal Kris gains more context when we consider Charlie's overbearing sexual and sexist comments. In one scene, Charlie unfolds a pornographic centerfold; in another, he exposes a lightning bolt on his chest, which according to him, is a symbol of his virility. These characters do not, as an essentialist reading may suggest, possess an inherent self independent of their social co-construction with others. The students' bodies are in constant and anticipatory dialogue with one another. Their bodies are not already formed but are always involved in a process of becoming betwixt and between social contexts.

The issue of the body invokes the materiality in the oppression the Welton students suffer at the hands of their teaching and administrating counterparts. We use the word "administration" to suggest a formal body of laws perfected for purposes of normalization. As a backdrop, Welton's natural surroundings (e.g. the grassy fields, lakes, and wildlife) point to the unnaturalness, the ironic perversion of their schooling. When Knox rides a bike down a grassy hill, a flock of birds flood the sky to avoid getting hit. The trees, ponds, and wildlife which canopy the school grounds mask Welton's manufactured and instrumental education. This juxtaposition reminds us how instrumental reason subjugates nature for technical purposes, rather than emancipatory interests. The students' objective world sets the context for their learning. They have very little input on the work that they do in class, on the production of knowledge that is evaluated, and on the creative directions which they would like to pursue.

Welton's official curriculum material—one that the school principal, Nolan, boasts "is set, proven, and works"—follows a program of inquiry that fetishizes the production of knowledge. It concentrates more on "what works" and disregards the work which goes into knowing. On Keating's first day of class, we learn the "Prichard Scale" Welton uses to determine the "greatness" of a poem. Keating strategically sketches the Scale on the chalkboard as a two-coordinate system with the poem's "importance" on one axis and its "perfection" on another. Somehow, beauty, or what Prichard calls "artful rendition," is rendered quantifiable. We are reminded here of Immanuel Kant's compendium on beauty. Consider his words in the following passage:

*Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful. . . . Consequently he [sic] must believe that he has reason for attributing a similar satisfaction to everyone. He will therefore speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgment logical. . . . Consequently the judgment of taste, accompanied with the consciousness of separation from all interest, must claim validity for every man, without this universality depending on objects. That is, there must be bound up with it a title to subjective universality. (381; italics in original)*

For Kant, self-interest taints the ideal representation of beauty. Any purposiveness on the part of the subject renders beauty less than ideal. Any conceptualization of an object (e.g. a rose or, in our case, a poem) with relations outside of itself stains the objectification of beauty. According to Kant, such is the human capacity to reason. Kant critiques the western obsession with ideal, sublime rationality in his attempt to synthesize the objective with the subjective, and reason with faith. *The Prichard Scale reifies the neutral and ahistorical concept of beauty.* It fails to note that a critic of poetry cannot divorce her values from the hermeneutics of beauty. A priori assumptions always taint our perceptions which provide the necessary elements of our conceptual maps. This has been the staple of sociological wisdom for several generations.

In addition and in real terms, beauty is a political construct with consequences as well as liberatory possibilities. Beauty is part of a system of relations involving prior commitments to valuation of qualities between things and people, not quantifiable measures of worth. Rather than seeking consensus on the "nature" of beauty, critical educators should look for contradictions in the aesthetic. Keating never extends his critique of schooling to include an interrogation of Western male standards of beauty. *Keating ignores the case that different cultures have different standards of judgment.* When the students ask Keating in the courtyard about the original Dead Poets, he recalls his group reading poems from Whitman, Thoreau; in sum, he says, "The biggies." Keating fails to weave his insights outside of a Western discourse on language and beauty, unabashed

of the Western deletion of competing subaltern voices from the margins. Poetic verse is always imbricated with technical standards for beauty that suppress the social production of beauty in exchange for meter, rhyme, and form (e.g., Shakespearean or Italian sonnets). The poetics of beauty never speaks for itself but is refracted by particular interests and produced by ideological imperatives that have been shaped by history.

“Seize the day,” Keating advises. In effect, he is asking the students: What is it about yourselves that you no longer want to be? Keating counsels Neil Perry to practice the moral courage required to live his life in the direction he desires. Neil’s longing to act in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* represents his desire to will his life in the direction he wants, to produce his life’s own dramaturgy, to be autonomous as opposed to being an automaton. Keating’s oppositional teaching style unsettles Welton’s hegemonic relations of power, especially those that reconfirm parental authority and decision-making. Neil resists his father’s impositions by circumventing and thwarting his father’s control: by lying about dropping out of the play. Further, he lies to Keating about having confronted his father about his desires. Neil “seizes the day” by activating the agency he possesses to fulfill his destiny on stage. After his father threatens to send him to military school, Neil commits suicide. Suicide becomes his last opportunity to act, to make an existential choice that joins him with the Dead Poets of the past.

Keating’s inspirational, and at times transgressive, pedagogy lacks the critical discourse necessary for liberatory practices. Resistance is primarily confined to the secrecy of the cave meetings where students privatize their dialogues. Thus, it does not threaten Welton’s hegemonic hold on the student population. The film fails to consider the fact that ideological hegemony relies upon a certain exercise of resistance. Activities such as cave meetings, tearing out pages from assigned books, and reciting self-generated poetry are personalized moments of resistance that, when kept private, reconfirm hegemonic relations. Resistance is reduced to idiosyncratic acts of bourgeois transgression, performative moments of apostasy without the benefit of critical analysis.

Benedict Kerkvliet reminds us about the important differences between “everyday resistance” and “unusual resistance.” Everyday resistance is usually composed of individual acts by private individuals lacking formal organization. It includes such acts as pilfering small items from a company one works for in response to low wages. Unusual resistance is a more formal band of individuals with a chosen leadership and an agreed upon central target of opposition. Though unusual resistance benefits from the added organization, its members are also more visible to their targeted opposition and can be more vulnerable to disciplinary measures than everyday resisters. The Dead Poets Society II celebrates resistance without the benefit of calculated actions toward a collective goal. The group also lacks what Michel de Certeau refers to as “tactics,” or those acts which resemble guerrilla warfare and lack predictable sites and centers of activity (Sleeter and McLaren). Distinct from “strategies,” which belong to a category of surveillance, tactics escape the gaze of official power through indeter-

minate strikes. Without the benefit of a discourse extending beyond a celebration of transgression and conceptions of self, students lack the political power to produce “bodies without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari). By bodies without organs, Deleuze and Guattari do not suggest bodies without hearts, lungs, and stomachs. As opposed to “full bodies,” bodies free from *organizational* territories of desire involve the discharge of institutions as excrement from humans as desiring-machines. In the film, this is semiotically accomplished when Todd vomits on the vast whiteness of snow after he learns of Neil’s death. Todd’s body rejects what his social conditions have made of him, a docile body. After the discharge, Todd runs away wildly, his screams reverberating against the still trees and into the white darkness of the field at dawn, finally letting out his barbaric “yawp.”

Members of Dead Poets Society II feel like they are challenging the status quo without actually transforming asymmetrical relations of power. Their actions fail to move beyond the pleasure of resistance for its own sake. Resistance at Welton takes the form of a personal revelation rather than a rebellion and actually serves to reify the alienation of the students through their absorption of the mere facticity and inevitability of defeat into their very conception of themselves. In Bakhtinian socio-linguistics, the students participate in a pseudo-carnival, a bourgeois excursion on the wild side. In Stam’s words:

Carnival in our sense is more than a party or a festival; it is the oppositional culture of the oppressed, the official world as seen from below; not the mere disruption of etiquette but the symbolic, anticipatory overthrow of oppressive social structures. On the positive side, it is ecstatic collectivity, the joyful affirmation of change, a dress rehearsal for utopia. On the negative, critical side, it is a demystifying instrument for everything in the social formation that renders collectivity impossible: class hierarchy, sexual repression, patriarchy, dogmatism and paranoia. (135)

Welton students have an easy time affirming the positive side of carnival. They welcome the liberationist opportunities and controlled *jouissance* that Keating opens up for them: e.g. the tearing out of book pages, the standing atop their desks, and the cave meetings. However, they fail to self-reflect on the challenges to carnival. They fail to understand how the social logic of dominant society is actually inscribed and enfolded in the ambivalent vicissitudes of their daily life. Keating failed to enact a pedagogy that provided students with a critical vernacular which could have distanced them from their pleasure in participating in the act of refusing authority. Occupying a privileged linguistic capital, Charlie seduces Gloria and Tina with lines from a sonnet created to “woo women,” according to Keating. The young women’s apparent amazement at Charlie’s poetic sensibilities, albeit plagiarized from original authors, suggests their uneducated class background. In another scene, Charlie creates a spectacle out of himself apparently due to his own sexual repression when he relays a phone



message from God to Principal Nolan saying, "It's God. He says we should have girls at Welton." In other instances, students objectify women as sexual exploits or subject them to the male gaze, as in Knox's fixation on Kris during the pep rally. Subsequently, after having been discovered as a Dead Poets Society II member, Cameron advises the rest of the group to cooperate with the administrators in scapegoating Keating.

Ultimately, and with Keating's assistance, the students fail to bridge Bacchic revelry with Bakhtinian rebely. They lack the ability to articulate a political project which extends beyond the celebration of self and into the transformation of their social conditions. Keating's concept of agency is ultimately naive. He seems unable to grasp the idea that real relations declare their own meanings unambiguously within the regime of the "taken-for-granted" yet are still ideological because they can only be understood within certain systems of representation. Had Keating been able to engage his students in ideology critique, he would have been able to assist them in understanding their misrecognition of themselves. Keating retained an exaggerated belief in autonomous agency and in the novelty and ludic power of personalistic transgression. In doing so, Keating simply enacts one of the most recurring *topoi* of modern education, the rejection of sameness and routine, and the celebration of the new.

Keating fails to consider how individuals are differentially enabled to act by virtue of the economic and cultured constraints they face, and by virtue of the opportunities afforded them on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, he fails to recognize how knowledge is socially and historically constructed, and how individuals are synecdochically related to the wider society through asymmetrical relations of power and privilege. Keating's position denies and obscures the politics of difference. While Keating rightly and admirably sought to imperil the familiar, to unsettle the certainty of Welton's sovereign regime of truth, and to render problematic the regulatory apparatuses within which proper behavior and comportment and social interactions are analyzed, he is unable to analyze how student subjectivities are rationalized and accommodated to existing regimes of truth and social divisions of labor. Because Keating appears to adopt a quasi-Durkheimian view according to which the social order is integrated by way of an organic solidarity, he fails to consider sufficiently how individuals are formed out of competing solidarities that overlap and are conflictual. Keating's resistance is just another way of rewriting ethnocentrism as a defense of Western civilization. He subsumes and simplifies diverse political and cultural forms of resistance and celebrates unwittingly the ideology of individualistic transgression which reinforces the very traditionalism and ethical quietism which he is trying to subvert.

We are not arguing that personal responsibility be erased by collective responsibility. Critical pedagogy requires the cultivation of a receptivity towards a dialogue that is rooted in everyday sensuous existence in the communal world. Such a dialogue is not rooted in collectivism nor a Nietzschean act of individual self-realization, but rather in a community of learners which is fundamentally

dialogical. While Keating recognized that the school requires atomized individuals but cannot tolerate interpersonal relations based on free association, he was unable to create a genuine community based on an openness to the other. This is because his pedagogical dialogism is still trapped in the idea of the self-sufficient, Cartesian cogito. He failed to notice the necessity of the presence of the other in the self. His assertion of "seize the day" is ultimately an arrogant conceit, a dogmatic postulate premised on the autonomous, self-centered ego. Peak experiencing by "sucking the marrow out of life" is constituted dialogically, accompanied by the multiple consciousness of a self-other relation. For Keating, "seize the day" becomes an enunciative act celebrating the single consciousness and monologic desire that suppresses an understanding of the ethical power of the self-other relation.

In fact, it is Keating's "essence of man" humanism which betrays Keating and the boys. They embody a notion of liberation which ends with the self that merely needs to be recovered and not with the continuous transformation of material conditions (Althusser). Humanism is limited by its reduction of people as free and rational. It purports that through the law of reason, liberation is realized as a fact of human nature and is an anticipated yet pre-existing essence. Humanism, to Althusser, involves a fallacious double move characterized by an empiricist-idealist epistemology. It assumes, in one movement, that if human essence is universal, then it necessitates a given that individuals are concrete subjects: hence an empiricism of the subject. In another movement, humanism locates the essence of humanity in every individual: hence an idealism of the essence. Both movements affirm the individual at the cost of the collective. However, a negation of humanistic universals does not equate to a rejection of the conditions of its historical necessity as a discourse with material consequences. Humanism is a symptom of the overall social formation and its determinations. As a result of the film's classical humanism, resistances are isolated from one another. For instance, Charlie speaks for himself when he invites Gloria and Tina to the cave and then implicates the group during his antics in the chapel. He never fully negotiates his position with others toward a collective solidarity; resistance becomes a private decision. Consequently, it is relatively easy for administrators, teachers, and parents to "divide and conquer" the DPS II. Also, we empathize with Neil as an individual in anguish without connecting him with Charlie or the others. Neil seems to suffer alone. As a group, the students never fully shatter the micro-technological gaze that Welton's sentinels of truth and custodians of tradition use to discipline the students. This is best illustrated when Nolan, the principal, announces that he aims to indict the culprits responsible for inserting an "unauthorized article" in the school newspaper. He forebodes, "Rather than spending my valuable time, ferreting out the guilty persons, [pause; tone of voice lowers] . . . and let me assure you I will find them. . . . I'm asking any or all students who know about this article to make themselves known now." Isolated from one another, the subversives are cut off

from each other, depotentiated as a body politic. Their resistance is regulated under the supervision of Nolan and company.

The film leaves unproblematized the different faces of oppression by isolating one type: student oppression. The discourse on students lacking a voice in school is emphasized at the expense of gender oppression. Indeed, the film's portrayal of women during a cave meeting does not transcend their stereotypical role as sexual objects. Kris is in constant fear that her boyfriend-protector, Chet Danbury, will discover Knox's persistence to steal her from him. Kris is caricatured as Chet's possession. Kris is seen as morally powerless to judge Knox's actions according to her own ethical standards but must look to Chet for accountability. Charlie contradicts his own wishes for emancipation when he attempts to seduce Gloria and Tina with the very same (Shakespearean) sonnets the group recites during cave meetings to feel liberated from their teachers. This dialectic of consciousness raising points out the contradictions inherent in a discourse lacking a self-reflective apparatus.

As McLaren has said elsewhere, compared to the dictatorial approach involving rote learning and severe military-style discipline that is used by most teachers at Welton, the classroom approach used by Keating is very innovative—you could call it liberal and not be wrong—and amounts to shattering mainstream conventions in the school. The students find Keating to be a charismatic leader, if not a liberating one. One of the problems that we have with this form of pedagogy is that it suggests that self-empowerment can exist without calling the existing social order into question. Issues of class, gender, and ethnic inequality are never raised. In fact, we would go so far as to claim that this form of liberal, humanist pedagogy serves to contain the political, to discursively police revolt, to equate liberation with the personal over the social, and to mask forms of domination. It is a pedagogy steeped in the romance of word at the expense of the world. This is revealed in the sexism of Keating, who claims that poetry was invented to “woo women.” The students are conspicuously not invited to problematize the relationship among the authoritarianism in the school, the way power works in the larger society to silence certain groups, and its entanglements in social practices which serve the rich and the powerful.

Jim Berlin would refer to this as a form of expressionistic rhetoric: although it includes a denunciation of economic, political and social pressures to conform—to resist the institutionally sponsored production of desire, attitude, and behavior—it is resistance in the service of the privatized ego, and the privatized male ego at that. As Berlin notes, expressionistic rhetoric reinforces the entrepreneurial virtues of individualism, private initiative, risk-taking, and subversion of authority. It is the ideology of the unique, private vision of a Donald Trump buried in the tropes of Walt Whitman, devoid of a concern with how material and social constraints prohibit other, less fortunate groups from realizing their private vision. It is as if consciousness were somehow not connected to the workings of power or as if hierarchies of power and privilege were natural hierarchies.

As a teacher, Keating attempts to defamiliarize the experience which the students have of rote learning and blind obedience to adult authority and the ruling-class economies of power and privilege; and while he is intent, perhaps even insistent on getting beyond the deformation of the individual as authorized by the discourses of tradition and the prevailing regimes of truth of the time, the result is the struggle for uniqueness—perhaps even eccentricity—of individual expression. Jim Berlin describes this kind of subversiveness as more apparent than real. It is debilitatingly divisive of political protest because it encourages individuals to achieve unique personhood in antiseptic isolation from any sense of collective struggle around the referent of difference and otherness. It is a pedagogy which operates without consideration of how power works to privilege certain groups over others on the basis of race, class, and gender, and Keating takes no pains to narrate the contingency of his own and the students' race, class, and gender privilege.

It is a soft mode of resistance easily co-opted by those forces it seeks to delegitimize; it represents a form of resistance which actually complements the capitalist ethos of possessive individualism. In Terry Eagleton's terms, Keating's pedagogy is a form of moral technology which structures modes of desire that the society needs in order to promote capitalist social relations. It teaches what he terms a "bourgeois mode of subjectivity" precisely in the way it celebrates learning for the sake of learning, and creativity for its own sake, which is a mistaken virtue we believe, because creative learning never speaks for itself and is always inscribed by political interests and supported by relations of power. There is a certain creativity to the Nazis' "final solution" that we dare say no teacher would ever want her students to emulate. We are not arguing that liberal humanism was responsible for the holocaust, but we are arguing that freedom and creativity should always be understood in relation to the social context in which they are engendered and put to use. Critical pedagogy poses a crucial question: Freedom and creativity for what?

Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's critique of the liberal humanist classroom can be appropriately applied to the pedagogy of *Dead Poets Society*. Keating's pedagogy reveals itself as one of "fancy"—what Zavarzadeh's calls a "pedagogy of pleasure." Keating's notion of liberation is personal and eminently ahistorical, and has little to do with emancipation. It is a pedagogy formally "at odds" with the "serious" workaday bourgeois world but does not seriously question the underlying assumptions or relations of power which inform it. Questions involving power/knowledge relations are suspended, and dangerous memories of human suffering and rebellion are never raised. We leave our students with the following questions in relation to the pedagogy represented in the film: What vision of the future inheres in the pedagogy of *Dead Poets Society*? What vision of social justice? What model of the individual subject? What suppositions involving democracy? We believe that the more we attempt to clarify what we mean by "critical pedagogy," the more we will be given opportunities for discussing and elaborating the values, suppositions, and basis for practice which inform our

teaching, learning, research practices, and, perhaps most important of all, the vision of the future which inheres in them.

*Dead Poets Society* inspires its viewers to resist oppression in schools. Through Keating, the power of a transgressive pedagogy offers alternative ways of looking at education. Keating encourages the viewers to stand on different planes of vision in order to look at the familiar from new frames of reference, or in Rorty's terms, to search for more "edifying" ways to tell stories about the world. However, the film falls short of moving beyond resistances and into a political project. The students experience moments of emancipation. By the end, one senses that some members of the school's culture have changed without transforming the culture of power. This is not an altogether hopeless state of affairs. Sporadic jolts to the system may give rise to larger political movements (Bottomore). However, without a critique of language and a language of critique, Welton students lack a powerful tool for cultural emancipation. They are limited by the structures of signification within the discourses that they occupy.

At the film's conclusion, the viewers witness a triumphal moment as the students stand proudly atop their desks and hail their leader, Keating: "Oh captain, my captain." In solidarity, the subversives stand side-by-side. Yet if we slice through the cloud of emotions, we are left hopeful but ambivalent about their plight. A collective oppositional discourse offers hope for social justice. We can only wish that these individual strands of disenchantment and resentment gradually entwine themselves into a collective struggle. Without a public, counter-hegemonic coalition, students do not muster enough power to challenge the dominant discourses of their school. What may result is their heightened marginalization.

Students who viewed *Dead Poets Society* with us were initially enthusiastic about the film. Some saw it as a definitive representation of an embodied critical pedagogy. Virtually no students were able to discern the distinction between critical pedagogy as articulated by Freire and other criticalists, and liberal bourgeois pedagogy vis-à-vis Keating. We began discussions of the film by asking students to compare their own experiences as high school students with those of the students in the film. We also asked our students to evaluate Keating's pedagogical practices in light of their pedagogical imperatives and characteristics that they would like to embody in their own teaching practices. We found that the charismatic portrayal of Keating by Robin Williams made it difficult to separate Keating's engaging personality from the pedagogical philosophy he appeared to embrace in the film. Students admired Keating's nonconformist teaching practices and described them as desirable attributes for a teacher to possess. Our attempts to contrast Keating's pedagogy with what we had been reading about critical pedagogy was described as an expression of "militant Marxism" or "dogmatic social viewpoints" by some students. Other students reacted by saying that a single teacher "can do little more than reach out to help students on an individual basis." This was followed by a reaction that stressed

the vulnerability of the critical pedagogue in terms of sanctions by the administration for supporting "biased political viewpoints." In short, we found that our students reacted to our pedagogy in much the same way as Keating's students in the film did to him: they were initially hesitant, cautious, and skeptical.

After discussing with students various readings in critical pedagogy and developing with them a working vocabulary of critical terminology, students were able to point to many of the limitations in Keating's pedagogical philosophy and praxis. Critical pedagogy was identified in the final instance as the production of a pedagogical locality which can be characterized as a situated community of dialogical learners. Such a community is dedicated to generating the context for dialogical praxis whereas in mainstream pedagogies, schooling is produced or driven by the already existing context provided by the nation-state. That the students were able to make this distinction is, in our minds, one of the most essential steps in understanding both the perils and the promise of critical pedagogy.

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