

Editor's preface

As Lynn Mario de Sousa, my daughter and I visited “Máquina” an exhibition of the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor at a cultural space in Sao Paulo a couple of days ago, my daughter asked me: “Why does this space have such a deep effect on me? I feel like vomiting, but I don't want to leave. What is the point of this?” What followed was a long existential conversation about different manifestations of art, which I believe also applies to theory. We talked about three different uses and forms of production (we invented the distinctions on the spot and we have had fun problematizing them since then).

The first was “decorative art” that reproduces the scripts of beauty we inherit and is used to affirm and validate those scripts when placed on display to be recognized as “beautiful”. The “point” of this art is to recreate a sense of shared aesthetic values within a specific community. We talked about how artistic production oriented to this form of art was still the most rewarded in her experience at school, making her feel like she was not an artist because she never felt that what she produced at school was truly “beautiful” in the shared sense of what beautiful looked like.

The second distinction was “naming art”, the kind of art that exposes what our normalized scripts of reality “foreclose” – what we have to forget in order to continue to believe in the naturalized discourses we choose and/or inherit. If a foreclosure is a constitutive disavowal or a sanctioned ignorance, the purpose of this kind of art is to remind us of what we have become used to forgetting or denying. Therefore the “point” is to prompt us to observe ourselves observing. Lynn talked about a print of “Las Meninas” of Velazquez, which was part of the exhibition, as an example of that, as it flips the role of the viewer and the canvas showing us how representations manipulate what is perceived as real. In this kind of art, the artist crafts (or is crafted by) something precise and intelligible that can seduce spectators to look deeper at their stories, to come to the edges of meaning and to dance on that edge: making what is familiar strange and strangeness more familiar.

The third distinction was “vomiting art”, or art that radically disturbs the scripted, idealized and controlled structures of identity and of the world we create for ourselves, prompting all our bottled toxic anxieties to surface so that they can find a way out of our bodies. This kind of art pierces through our safety-numbness – without apologies. If it does not trigger us, it does not do its healing work. However, its medicine is healing through the fire, through facing the pain, cauterizing old wounds while opening new, necessary ones, if one allows it to work. If “naming art” takes you to the edge, “vomiting art” blows a powerful whirlwind that will push you over the edge, so that you can aim for the ground and miss it, learning to fly as you play beyond what you used to believe was your body or your self image.

One of the texts in the exhibition mentioned that the artist needs to dance around the void. I added that s/he also often needs to be sucked by it for periods of time without any promise of rescue. But it is the art itself, in its vomiting impulse, that brings everything out of the void, into the world, as it moves, kicks and screams through the artist's existence (mirroring our own) in the realm of un-intelligibility. Kantor was an example of that. I told my daughter that this was the kind of art that had “no point”, apart from showing that our search for points was futile in the face of the creative (both destructive and not) unbounded force/void within us. She stopped in front of an abstract drawing for some time. She told me later she had drawn something similar once and thought that, as her picture was not beautiful or had a clear point, it was worthless and a sign that she did not really know what she was doing. Kantor helped

her see something different within herself – and her experience with voids and unintelligibility in a different light.

I kept thinking about this experience as I reflected on this editorial – the uses of critical literacy to name what is hidden and the potential use of it to help us vomit and fly. I am sure critical literacy can help with naming, as it certainly does in the articles in this volume, to force us to see things we might not have otherwise chosen to. However, I am not sure if logic alone can help us fly into something radically different from what we are used to. In this sense, critique is often quite circular – as we have to use the very referents we criticize to make the points we want to make (we work within the realm of what is intelligible). And this is not at all a bad thing. It is just a limitation and this limitation is extremely important as it invites us beyond it, by showing the insufficiency and indispensability of both art and theory. I hope we can discuss this further in our next issues.

Now back to this issue. This collection of articles has two main themes related to teaching critical literacy in teacher education and problematizing representations/interpretations of text. May introduces the metaphor of the preservice teacher as a “bricoleur”; the opportunistic handyman. Minding the contingent strengths and inadequacies of the metaphor, she applies it to a qualitative study on preservice teachers doing critical literacy work. Pollard addresses the difficulties novice teacher educators face in the transition from traditional, authoritarian, transmissional mode of teaching to the critical, self-enquiry based modes advanced by critical literacy.

Svendsen’s paper contemplates the unique position of the textbook as an unavoidable form of political discourse – how it both serves as a tool to establish and maintain dominant discourses and as an analytic window into such discourses – and exemplifies this through an analysis of four Danish Media and Communication textbooks. Bendix, Danielzik and Kiesel analyse Development Education material available publicly for NGOs, teachers and multipliers. They expose the largely blatant disregard for unequal power relationships in these materials, and the inadequacy with which it is confronted when it is at all addressed. Marmer and Ziai explore the portrayal of African peoples in German secondary school textbooks. Specifically, how the portrayal supports the narrative of the developed, benevolent North vs. the underdeveloped, impoverished South, thereby reproducing and (re)embedding racism and eurocentrism in explanations of global inequalities.

In the last article, Lau identifies and examines persisting problems in critical pedagogy from a poststructuralist and feminist perspective. She is concerned about the persistent (and persistently unaddressed) power relationships between teachers and students in critical learning environments, and positivistic and rationalistic modes of transmission which attempt to discover objectively “true” and “correct” readings of socio-political discourse while generally disregarding the plurality of identities and partiality of knowledge which shape these texts.

I hope you enjoy it.

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