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# Autobiography, Aesthetics and Politics: Educating for World Spectatorship

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## Introduction

Any society's anxieties about its present state are often evident in its meditations on the future. For instance, Fritz Lang's 1927 film, *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), presents a dystopic vision of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the perspective of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It depicts a world in which humans have become rather disturbingly machine-like, while machines have become uncannily human in their appearance and nature (Donald, 1992). Specifically, the robot Maria, the alter-ego of a biological woman of the same name, exhibits desires that exceed the control of her creator, the mad inventor Rotwang, with apocalyptic consequences. The film can be critiqued on many counts, including its crude gender stereotyping and its heavy-handed religious imagery; but for our purposes it offers an interesting exemplification of some key themes. These include the way seeing and non-seeing are regulated and controlled in human society. The stark bifurcation between the industrial elites – the haves – and the proletarian masses – the have nots – ensures that for the most part their lives do not intersect and that each remains invisible to the other. This bifurcation is embodied in the stark vertical separation of their lives, with the hedonistic elite playing and relaxing in penthouse gardens, while the masses toil underground. The rigid separation of the two realms represents the repression of the backbreaking and dehumanizing conditions of the workers – literally out of sight and out of mind in an artificial hell.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find ourselves still firmly within the grip of capitalism. Part of the explanation for capitalism's tenacity and resilience, at least for psychoanalysis, lies in the way it "capitalizes on our status as unnatural beings" (McGowan, 2016, p. 22), subjecting us as subjects of desire to a perpetual search for the thing – the commodity, the experience, the product – that will compensate for the loss of an object we never had (McGowan, 2013, 2016). Capitalism's essential project is one of accumulation of things – of profits, wealth, income, assets – that we believe at some level will provide us with the satisfaction we crave. This project of accumulation requires the sacrifice of the present in return for promised future rewards in terms of access to 'the good life' (McGowan, 2016). In similar fashion, education is held up as something that will transform individuals and redeem society in return for sacrifice and effort providing access to 'the good life'. The co-implication of neoliberal capitalism and education was proclaimed by then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, when he announced his government's focus on 'education, education, education'. For, like capitalism, contemporary neoliberal education's essence lies in accumulation – of (commodified) knowledge but also of credits, grades, credentials and qualifications.



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The capitalist drive towards accumulation goes hand in hand with anxieties around the twin threats of scarcity and risk. In education, the repeated circulation of political discourses highlighting these threats is echoed in the pervasive paranoia around standards and accountability. This paranoia drives education's compulsive circuits of transmissive teaching, assessment and testing that have reduced much teaching to what Peter Taubman (2009) aptly characterizes as the pedagogical equivalent of painting by numbers. Critically, anxieties around scarcity and risk, and the defensive drive towards accumulation that serves as a bulwark against these threats, each require and feed off each other. As Britzman (2011) notes, the anxieties that find reflection within schools in the idealization of practices such as the asking and answering of questions, the giving and following of directions, the need to teach lessons, and the sadistic pleasure of giving failing grades, are exacerbated rather than assuaged by these practices. Tragically, these anxieties feed practices that suppress risk in the more productive and essential sense highlighted by writers such as Biesta (2013) who remind us that risk is always present as education is an encounter between human beings not machines.

Another defining ideal of capitalism is productivity, and, in particular, the notion of exponential growth through endless gains in productivity. This orients capitalism around ends and obscures the means by which these ends are achieved. Likewise, in education our focus is on goals, aims, outcomes, and results. In each case, our attention is focused on products rather than processes. It is no accident that neoliberal capitalism is governed by the ends-oriented consequentialist ethics of utilitarianism, just as schools and universities are governed by the ends oriented ideology of outcomes based education. In psychoanalytic terms, capitalism and education focus our attention on the product that we believe will satisfy our desire – mistakenly, because desire is constitutive rather than contingent – rather than on the (purportedly) lost object that is the cause of desire. In each realm, capitalism and education, we are encouraged to focus on the ends at the expense of attending to the labour, the effort, the work, the time, the blood, sweat, and tears, that enable access to the end.

Our commitment to productivity is often secured through a mixture of seduction and blackmail. We see this, for instance, in the final paragraph of the United Kingdom's Ministerial Foreword to the 2016 White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education (DfE), 2016). Morgan's statement masterfully combines folk-knowledge and moralism, alongside responsabilisation and menace, as it reminds us that "children only get one chance at education and every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential. As a parent, I know only too well that childhood is short, and when it comes to a child's education, there's no time to waste" (p. 4).

In one sense, the claim that schooling offers a unique window of opportunity in life is a truism, and bears no specific relation to this particular government's policies in relation to education and teacher education but could just as easily be marshalled in favour of an entirely opposite set of proposals. But here we want to focus on the statement's embodiment of the notion, borrowed from Edelman (2004), of reproductive futurism and how it holds teachers and teacher education hostage to future, and ever-increasing, productivity. Edelman's critical insight lies in identifying how the generalised figure of the Child – as distinct from individual children – whose future is deemed to be the underlying rationale and overriding telos of social organisation, is used by conservatives to assert and reproduce a hegemonic heteronormativity, against which the queer is positioned as posing a perpetual threat. Refusing the blackmail this entails is the message of the title of Edelman's book, *No Future*. Adapting this insight to teacher education allows us to identify how teachers are continually held hostage to fantasmatic visions of ever-rising standards and ever-increasing degrees of inclusion – more and more schools being deemed outstanding, more and more students achieving above average, ever-



expanding circles of participation in higher education – as the sure path to limitless growth and productivity gains in the economy. Against this, it's tempting to reply with Lee Edelman's angry retort to heteronormative reproductive order in the US: "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop" (2004, p. 29).

However, it is also worth noting the close relationship between abundance and scarcity that haunts Morgan's words. As Todd McGowan (2016) writes, "We find unconscious satisfaction in scarcity, while our conscious thoughts focus on abundance. We need to presuppose both the existence of this scarcity and the possibility of its future elimination for us to continue to struggle with the determinants of the capitalist system. If we give up either the fantasy of present scarcity or the illusion of future abundance, we give up capitalism as such" (p. 204).

In similar fashion, the logic of competition that governs neoliberal capitalism, with its either/or insistence on logically incompatible states of profit or loss, winners or losers, credit or debt, deserving or undeserving, also dominates education through logics of pass or fail, effective or ineffective, above or below average. At the same time, this unsavoury, dog eat dog logic is disavowed in politics and education policy, camouflaged by the cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011; Moore & Clarke, 2016) that declares that every child matters, that no child will be left behind, that all can succeed, and that the right policy decisions will ensure that educational excellence is indeed found everywhere. This disavowal is key to understanding the depoliticizing dimension of neoliberal education that goes hand in hand with its ideological saturation.

The depoliticisation enacted by neoliberal politics can be seen in the traits that are valorized by policy and media discussion. The neoliberal subject is positioned as flexible, adaptable and resilient. These traits are assumed to be positive attributes to which we should all aspire; but in practice what they entail is a subject who will take whatever treatment or conditions are dished out and come back asking for more. This is not a subject who is likely to resist, to coordinate resistance with others or to envisage an alternative reality; flexibility, adaptability and resilience are about fitting into the current reality and taking the latter as given rather than seeing any reality as contingent and contestable. For education, flexibility, adaptability and resilience are about maximizing one's assets and skills in relation to the so-called 'knowledge economy'. Indeed, we are continually told that in this bright, new shiny world with its opportunities for lifelong learning, we can be and do anything we want – travel the world and beyond to the moon, enhance and sculpt our physical and psychic selves and even manipulate the basic properties of ourselves and our progeny through genetic interventions – we can do anything, it seems, except, that is, change the parameters of political-economic reality. In similar fashion, we are told that education should not be contaminated by politics on the one hand; and on the other hand, its inherently political nature is surely revealed in the repeated refrain that education holds out the promise of a better future for individuals and society.

To sum up so far, education, learning, teaching and teacher education are driven by performance-oriented anxieties and governed by capitalist ideals of accumulation, productivity and competition. These ideals are embodied in the twin discourses of productive futurism that insists on constant sacrifice in the name of accumulation and cruel optimism that insists that all can succeed. What lies suppressed beneath these discourses – rather like the workers' material lives and conditions in Metropolis – is the capitalist reality that requires its blood price of failure on the part of some.



The ideals of productivity, competition, and performance have become naturalized, sedimented and ossified to the point where the subject of neoliberal education can only be thought of in terms of notions like resilience, flexibility and adaptability, which require compliance rather than resistance, and leaving no room for meaningful politics. Moreover, education, as in schooling, is increasingly resistant to the notion that “there is something at stake in life and learning that is not knowledge, but a form of non-knowing involving love, hate and desire” (Clarke, Michell, & Ellis, 2016, p. 118; cf Britzman, 2011). The consequence of this orientation is that much potential richness in education is occluded by the contemporary two-dimensional, input-output model, which seems to delegitimize experience, emotion, and embodiment. It is as if our fear of failure and aversion to risk has led us to extinguish any vibrancy or vitality in education and hence to de-aestheticize as well as to depoliticize it.

To reintroduce aesthetics and politics to education requires engagement with what we refer to as the power of negative thinking – the strategic deployment of conceptual tools that have the potential to destabilize and disrupt the hegemonic grip of the established status quo (Clarke & Phelan, 2017). In particular, we want to draw on ideas from psychoanalysis, phenomenology and queer theory to build an argument for an education beyond an instrumental and reductive notion of reason. In what follows, we retrieve the visual – via the language of spectatorship – and the tactile (including the historical) in our attempt to explore further the aesthetic encounter as fomenting a critical and complex mode of education. We want to investigate what alternative modes of education might open up where (unconscious) desire, rather than knowledge, is in the position of agency – indeed, if there is an ethical framework underpinning this exploratory reading of education as world spectatorship, it concerns an ethic of disruptive desire (Lacan, 1992). In our exploration, we foreground the role of objects in stimulating aesthetic encounters, generating autobiographical narratives (*currere*) that illustrate how meaning, feeling and being shift with time and circumstance, and disrupting any stable view of the self in relation. In short, we seek to study a possible world of education poised between passion and logos.

## Becoming World Spectators

Kaja Silverman’s (2000) book, *World Spectators*, invites us to descend from the heady realm of transcendental ideals and metaphysics, to exit Plato’s cave, where all is shadow and illusion, and where we remain trapped in a prison house of signs, to become World Spectators, engaged in “a kind of looking which takes place *in* the world and *for* the world – a kind of looking which not only stubbornly adheres to phenomenal forms, but also augments and enriches them” (pp. 2-3) through the human passion for resymbolisation. Within this world, in which visibility depends upon “a confluence of the phenomenal, the psychic, the specular, and the social” (p. 4), there are intending subjects but also intending objects: “a creature or thing’s form is indistinguishable from its aspiration to be seen” (p. 132); but more than this, “the world does not simply give itself to be seen, it gives itself to be loved” (p. 133). To put this another way, Silverman argues that when we look, in the most profound and creative sense of that word, we are always responding to a prior solicitation from other creatures and things...”; and “what the world of phenomenal forms solicits from us is our desire” (p. 144). In other words, appearance – world spectatorship – involves the paradoxical confluence of, on the one hand, being as presence and, on the other hand, the language of desire as absence (p. 144). The transformative meeting of absence and presence, however, can only occur when we relinquish claims to mastery – of the perceptual object and of the language of one’s desire – in order “to become the space within which the world itself speaks” (p. 145). Critically,





what we are likely to discover within this space is not just a matter of meaning but of beauty. As Silverman writes, “our capacity to signify beauty has no limits. It is born of a loss which can never be adequately named, and whose consequence is, quite simply, the human imperative to engage in ceaseless signification. It is finally this never ending signification that the world wants from us” (p. 146); and it is this that makes us world spectators.

In an essay titled, “The Painting in the Attic,” Caroline A. Jones (2007), art historian, engages with an oil painting in her attic depicting children of various ages standing together. What might be evocative about the painting, paradoxically titled *Untitled*, for a general viewer, she muses, is the facial expressions of the children – “two girls smile, a boy conveys mock surprise, a small girl looks solemn, a baby screams” – which “seem to seal each one into a separate world” where none reacts to any other (p. 234). As the artist who painted the piece, Jones is far from sanguine about its content, insisting that interpreting one’s own work is no less challenging than finding meaning in another’s. She can recall the practical struggles she faced as a high school art student in creating the piece, often running out of patience, ideas and strategies. She can remember that the painting originally hung in their family TV room where her siblings sat on the couch beneath.

Upon encountering the painting many years later (as an art historian), Jones (2007) realizes that the image was retrospective, in that she had illustrated herself and her siblings six years younger (in 1966) than they were at the time of painting (1972). She writes: “The painting’s convenient optic excludes a member of my family who was born in 1967 – the retarded [sic] youngest sibling in this clan” (p. 236). The insight that she had omitted her much beloved youngest sister disturbs Jones but it also reminds her of her sister’s ongoing “struggles to find a place in a family (and a world) predicated on competency and achievement” (p. 236). The life trajectory of each of those depicted in the painting was presumed – university, marriage, children, career – but the same could not be assumed for her sister.

The painting seems to produce the image of an ideal phase of her family’s life, “before the traumatic event that would forever mark us as different” (p. 236) and unable to claim the promise of happiness-ever-after. The re-encounter with the painting does not simply reinforce her belief that it is impossible to capture any artist’s intentions. Re-entering her life, the amateur painting evokes a bitter realization of a “repressive fantasy” (p. 236) the traces of which are nevertheless embedded in the painting by her adolescent self. The young artist tells a story over and above her wanting and doing, perhaps – a complex and disturbing story that starkly rebukes the typical family photographic portrait, where everything looks (fantasmatically) harmonious and unified, yet also bland and unreal. There are several reasons to explain the lack of unity in the painting; Jones sourced a range of photographs from various events and emotional moments to help her depict her brother and sisters. But why, she asks, did she choose those photographs? Jones (2007) asserts that the painting *refuses* to be unified:

The painting insists that the perfect moment is always already fractured, never unified in the first place. One preteen mugs, the baby cries, the little one refuses the obligatory camera smile. Only the oldest two – me and my older sister – appear to be composed for the camera/painting. Pictorial idealism fragments in the face of a reality it aims to signify. (p. 238)

Jones does not claim that her more recent insights about the painting are true but rather that they represent “a truth of evocation, not locked in this configuration, but



elicited from these pigmented surfaces by present interest and desire” (p. 241). It is evocative objects like the painting in the attic that invite us to augment and enrich them by resymbolization (Silverman, 2000). The meaning of objects shifts with time, place and person (Turtle, 2007). Object, family narrative, memories and space (attic; TV room) are woven into a complicated, ever-changing web (Mitchell, 2007). There seem to be many stories in Jones’ painting but the one she ‘sees’ depends on a particular confluence of family circumstances, a psychic life of an art historian, and the painting itself. The painting in the attic becomes to some extent (and she acknowledges this) a kind of transitional object – a special object which aspires to be seen and evokes particular meanings, at once soliciting her to be its willing subject *and* the author of its meaning: “we think with them, in order to think ourselves into coherent subjectivity” writes Jones (p. 242). Yet the construction of new meaning underscores the fragility of meaning, always on the edge of being rethought and resignified.

Jones’ encounter with the painting in the attic illustrates the link between outer and inner realms, objects and our psychic lives, and ultimately between being and meaning. The emotions of a child (depicted as calm and coping) vs. those of the high school art student (depicting (not all) her siblings retrospectively in her anxiety to restore order) vs. those of the art historian (surprised and dismayed by the absent presence in her painting – her desire for less difficult family circumstances and questions about her relationship to a sister with special needs) are each at play. The painting undercuts any simple story she might tell about her family but yet it served a transitional role in enabling Jones to cope for now and to “take things in stages” (Turtle, 2007, p. 9/22); to imagine her sister as part of her family required time, a lifetime even, but perhaps now the painting can be relinquished. There is both beauty and meaning in Jones’ chance re-encounter as the world reveals itself to her in a synthetic moment during which the anxious youth of the past is revealed to her vulnerable (i.e. defences lowered) adult self in the present; in anticipation of a compassionate future. Jones’ is “played upon by the inspiring arrival of the unselected, which often yields a very special type of pleasure—that of surprise. It opens us up, liberating an area like a key fitting a lock” (Bollas, 1993, p. 37).

## Touching Feeling

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) rich book, *Touching Feeling*, adds to Silverman’s work by extending the latter’s emphasis on visibility to encompass the full array of senses. The book “records the intuition that a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions... the same double meaning, tactile plus emotional,” comprises the sense and essence of both words (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003, p. 17). *Touching Feeling* invites us to address aspects of experience that do not present themselves in propositional form alongside (or beside) others that do. But the book also wants to resist placing these aspects of experience in a hierarchy *or* merely reversing one hierarchy in favour of another. In a similar spirit, it assumes that “the line between words and things or between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena is endlessly changing, permeable and entirely unsusceptible to any definitive articulation” (p. 6).

The spatial sensibility of Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thought is evident in the care she exhibits with regards to the prepositions she employs to frame her project. She notes that “the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* ... [also] ... seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors to implicit narratives of respectively, origin and telos.... *Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking” (p. 8).

Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that texture and affect, touching and feeling, seem to belong together. Why should this be so? “What they have in common is that at whatever



scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological” in the sense that “to describe them primarily in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation. Critically, unlike neoliberal capitalism’s logics of accumulation and competition, texture and affect are not governed by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of ends versus means” (2003, p. 21). Yet this does not mean that texture and affect short circuit reason, criticality or creativity: “To perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time. To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on *me*? Textual perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?” However, the sense of touch does undermine any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity: “to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold, and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before, if only in the making of the textured object” (p. 14).

Drawing on the work of Renu Bora, Sedgwick highlights the helpful distinction between ‘texture’ with one ‘x’ and ‘texxture’ with two ‘x’s. “Texxture is the kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being... but there is also the texture – one x this time – that defiantly or invisibly blocks or refuses such information; there is texture, usually glossy if not positively tacky, that insists instead on the polarity between substance and surface, texture that signifies the willed erasure of history”. Critically, texture is not restricted to the tactile and “although texture seems to have some definitional grounding with reference to the sense of touch, texture itself is not coextensive with any single sense... we *hear* the brush of corduroy trousers or the crunch of extra-crispy chicken” (2003, p. 15).

A focus on texture/texxture invites consideration of affects as forms of disruption and enjoyment so absent in much contemporary, means-ends oriented, education – “it is enjoyable to enjoy, angering to be angered, arousing to be aroused and so on” (Sedgwick, pp. 99-100). This makes affect particularly valuable for challenging the instrumentalism underpinning much current education practice by engendering and validating much needed passion. As Tyson Lewis (2012) writes, “passion” – such as that elicited in the aesthetic encounter – “builds a new sensory world that is not reducible to mere delusion, but is itself a refusal to accept the rules that bind certain affects to certain times, places, activities and modes of annunciation and production” (p. 6). The point, however, as Lewis continues, is not to merely replace intellect with passion but rather “to understand how education exists in the moment of an uncertain community poised between passion and *logos*” (p. 17).

In his compelling essay, “My Cello,” Tod Machover (2007), composer, inventor and cellist, recounts the centrality of the cello as an object in his life since early childhood and that continues to have “unconscious resonance” for him (Nettleton, 2016, p. 47). Machover describes a series of aesthetic encounters during which the cello operates as a ‘third object’ (Rancière, 2011, p. 15) that is owned by no one but which nonetheless subsists between himself and pedagogical figures such as his mother, father, several music teachers, and Indian musicians. He is at once a willing subject, ready to defer to the object as a powerful and passion-inducing presence; a playing adult who steps sideward into another reality, sitting “beside” the cello (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2007, p. 8), “poised between passion and *logos*” (Lewis, 2012, p.17).

Machover (2007) illustrates his first experience of “music training” as a two year old. Encouraged “to find music all over the house,” his mother and he would set out on “expeditions of her devising, discovering household objects that made interesting sounds,





that could in turn be combined to create new textures, emotions and narratives” (p. 14). She and he would proceed to make a ‘picture’ of the new composition so that it could be recreated later. And so he learned to invent music from the first principles of “sound, structure and score” (p. 14). At age eight, “yearning” for an instrument that had the same feel of those “natural, malleable” household objects, he embraced the cello “before learning the details” (p. 14).

Machover (2007) describes both pleasurable and disturbing experiences he had with the cello.

Seated at my cello, my body assumes a calm, natural position – my shoulders relaxed, letting gravity help bow pressure. Yet, I can feel the instrument vibrate from head to foot as I draw my bow across its strings, a throbbing through my chest, a buzzing through my legs and feet, a tingling to my fingertips (pp. 14-15).

The physicality of the instrument – strings of varying thicknesses that vibrate accordingly, a bridge and fingerboard that slope unevenly under the four strings, and reduced spacing between notes as the musician goes higher on each string – means that “each note feels different to play” (p. 16). As a result, while the cello felt pleasurable and controllable, “pure perfection” is “always slightly out of reach” (p. 16).

Under his mother’s tutelage, Machover learns to play the classics on the cello but at age thirteen he became exposed to popular music. Now enters a new teacher, his father, “a pioneer in the field of computer graphics” (p. 16), who is very comfortable with popular culture and willing to engage his young son. The cello with all its “sonic richness, thick-stringed resistance, wide range and lightning action” (p. 16) becomes an instrument for composing and performing rock music: “I threw away the bow, turned the instrument sideways and propped it on my lap like a (very, big, fat) guitar, clamped headphones around its belly, plugged it into a guitar amp and jammed” (p. 16). At the age of sixteen, Machover recalls encountering the cello as if for the first time in the company of his new teacher, Richard (Richie) Bock, who embraced classical, jazz, and rock. He recounts how his complacency about music making was destroyed and his former ease with technique totally disrupted. He learns to see nuance in cello playing: the continuous adjustment of pressure, pace, and angle depending on thickness of string and section of bow; the resonance achieved when the instrument vibrated freely; the beauty found in a simple constant sound played fully. He learns, again, how to listen carefully and critically, to attune himself to the slightest movement or tension felt in finger, hand, arm and back. He “learn[s] to meditate in sound ... how to practice for real” (p. 17). Eventually, influenced by Indian musicians and his newfound knowledge of computers, he begins to produce “sounds and textures that [go] beyond the cello” (p. 18). He projects into the future music making with his own children:

How do I teach a slide, a note perfectly in tune, a bow beautifully changed, a phrase delicately shaped, a musical story deeply felt and meaningfully conveyed? How do I share my love of music with my daughters when there is so much tough technique to learn, so much frustration to overcome? (p. 19)

It is clear from his narrative that Machover relates to the cello mnemically, endowing the instrument with personal historical significance. For him the cello is an object that contains many fragments of past experience and which enables him to reconnect with



those experiences in the present. As a mnemonic object, therefore, the cello keeps him in touch with former self states and constitutes an “island[] of intensity and significance in the unconscious” (p. 50). The cello not only provokes particular memories but it operates as a threshold to “a vast realm of proliferating associations” (p. 50), and anticipations of how he will be with his own children. His cello remains for him “the perfect gauge of complexity, of how much an individual human being can shape or master, follow or comprehend” (p. 20). One could argue that Machover’s essay also reflects an attempt to use the object of the cello to process parts of his internal world – “It is the object that is closest to me that I don’t share with others, the intermediary I use to reconnect to the forces and feelings that drew me to music in the first place” (p. 20).

### ***Currere*, Evocative Objects and Disruptive Desire**

A focus on aesthetics in education is not a panacea but it does offer some alternatives to the risk-averse instrumentalism and hyper-competition that grips so much educational practice today. We would argue, however, that Jones and Machover did not simply have “an aesthetic encounter, intellectual epiphany, transformative experience, or heightened awareness” (Slattery, 2017, p. 186). Rather, objects in their lives—the painting in the attic and the cello—evoke “a proleptic integration of time and memory” that irreversibly jolts the foundational perspective of self in relation—“the bedrock of our being”... (p. 186). The syncretical moment is one during which the subject ironically proclaims itself as a subject and an object of study simultaneously (Slattery, 2017). The self is no mirror image of reality but “a challenge to the very assumptions of totalizing images” on offer (p. 192). Slattery is referencing Pinar and Grumet’s (2015) *currere* as a method of autobiographical reflection—working from within—by which the self may pursue meaning “amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions of his or her own future,” through “mutual reconceptualization” (Schubert, 1986, p. 33) with others—be they human or non-human objects.

Compressed associations, conscious and unconscious, overwhelm but also potentially transform.

Patrick Slattery (2017) relates the story about when he, as an adolescent, came face to face with Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm*:

The intensity of the emotions of this artist touched a nerve in my adolescent confusion. I sensed the pain of the artist’s struggles and suffering, which seemed to parallel my own inner turmoil. Pollock’s frustration with social structures reverberated with my own indignation about the Vietnam War, racism, and social injustice. Jackson Pollock’s battle with alcoholism leaped from the canvas and caused me to reflect on my own family’s struggle with this disease. I did not know Jackson Pollock at the time, but I came to experience his emotions as I encountered *Autumn Rhythm*. ...I had never heard of Jackson Pollock, but I became the artist through his painting as his journey and my journey were united in a syncretical [proleptic] moment. (2017, p. 186)

Slattery’s aesthetic *encounter* with its possibilities for enjoyment and disruption has the potential to *counter* the “stark statistical affirmation of use values, direct effects and a preoccupation with moral exemplarity” (Bishop, 2012, p. 38) that characterizes so



much of education today. Significantly, the linear time of cruel optimism and reproductive futurism is disrupted as the synthetic—proleptic—moment of *currere* relies on “a holistic understanding of the past, present, and future simultaneously” (Slattery, 2017, p. 185). The self returns to the past as it intrudes upon the present, living within but not succumbing to the past, anticipating a return to the present during the second, progressive moment when one imagines future possibilities. The third moment is analytical as it attempts to describe the present, bracketing out past and future while being able “to juxtapose the past, present, and future, and evaluate the complexities of their intersectionalities” (Slattery, 2017, p. 191). In the final moment, synthesis is sought as one asks: “Who is that? What is the meaning of the present?” (Pinar & Grumet, 2015, p. 78). What is my form of life in the here and now, its public and private dimensions, its internal manifestations, its external behaviours? The self becomes available to itself; “I am placed together. Synthesis” (p. 79). The upshot is “destabilization of structure and subject itself” (p. 192). While the disruption to the internal world is neither always pleasurable nor tolerable, the political and aesthetic promise of *currere* is that it enables one “to see anew and to understand anew” (Pinar, 1991, p. 246).

Jones’ happenchance with ‘the painting in the attic,’ Machover’s life-long relationship to ‘my cello,’ and Slattery’s encounter with *Autumn Rhythms* convey the experience of prolepsis in which one is thrust out of one’s alienation and put back into touch with the complicated, textured layers of one’s becoming.

## Conclusion

The educational purpose of the curriculum is “to draw students out of themselves into unknown (to them) terrains of the “cultural field,” enabling them to engage with the world with insight, passion, and competence while never breaking the bridges of psychic attachment that makes the process of education subjectively and socially meaningful” (Pinar, 2012, p. 229). We would argue that evocative objects—seen, touched, felt—occupy that “borderland between subjectivity and objectivity” (Lasch, 1984, p. 194 in Pinar, 2012, p. 229). It is through the practice of desire, Silverman (2000) notes, that we may “approach what has traditionally been called virtue” (p. 46). The only sin for Silverman, after Lacan, is to give ground relative to one’s desires. The point of education is not “self-abandonment nor the suspension, until adulthood, of satisfaction” but “to become an individual, a citizen, a human subject engaged with intelligence and passion in the problems and pleasures of his or her life, problems and pleasures bound up with the problems and pleasures of everyone else in the nation, everyone on this planet” (Pinar, 2012, p. 229).

This essay was prompted, to a large degree, by the frustration we share with many educators and teacher educators in relation to the pedagogic regulation of seeing and the undemocratic limitations placed on the horizons of particular individuals and groups that we see operating in and through contemporary education and that a film like *Metropolis*, to return to our opening, brings to the forefront of our attention. Yet rather than seeking complete democratic emancipation through heroic activity and revolutionary upheaval, we need, perhaps, to “accept the ambivalence of participation and agency – we are always both subjects of and subject to” (Donald, 1992, p. 161). Embrace of such ambivalence falls largely to teachers for whom the possibility of epistemological or political innocence is forever foreclosed. As such, it becomes “impossible to imagine the exercise of liberty as a psychotic escape from relations of power. Instead it becomes an invitation or an obligation to act on the basis that the rules of the game can be changed while it is being played, however rigged the game may be in favour of some players and against others” (Donald, 1992, p. 161). Laying the path while walking, teachers might seek “to



reconstruct democratic education as an act of perceptual alternation rather than critical consciousness raising, thus enabling us to recognize how equality is not simply a project to be achieved but is the production of new ways of seeing, being, hearing and interacting within the present” (Lewis, 2012, p. 17); and, we would add, doing so always in relation to the past and in anticipation of a future. *Currere* in action!

## Notes

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