¡Pendejo! Preschoolers' Profane Play: Why Children Make Art

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Abstract

In this article, I address the concept of critical coalitions in play from two perspectives. First, I consider young children's art making with digital video through contemporary play frames that propose moving beyond the dichotomy of subject (child as actor; active meaning-maker) and object (child as dupe; susceptible to media and moral panic). This reaffirms that play is at once contradictory, pleasurable, fantastic, and culturally purposeful. Analysis of young children's digital video as play within frameworks proposed by Wilson (1976), Walkerdine (2007), and Freud (1922/1948) allows for an expansion of philosophical ideas about young children's art making. This coalition between art and play might also expound upon pedagogical ideas about both and their roles in young children's (and adults') lives. Complementarily, I propose that playing with children as a research approach has implications for pedagogy in early childhood art education.

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Motivation and Play: Why Do Children Make Art?

In his 1976 article, “Little Julian’s Impure Drawings: Why Children Make Art,” Brent Wilson writes with conviction, “Why do children draw in the first place? Until theories of child art attend to the factors that motivate children to make art, we will not have an adequate theory of child art” (p. 46).

In the article, Wilson identifies several significant motivations for children’s drawings. Chiefly among these are tension, tension relief, and its resultant pleasure. We might equally identify these attributes of drawing with Freud’s (1922/1948) description of the ‘pleasure principle’ (p. 1), or an organism’s psychic drive toward stasis. Yet, Julian Green, the Victorian child whose memoirs Wilson so carefully scrutinized, found pleasure in drawing the very subject matter dually hidden from children and repressed in Victorian society: Nudes, criminals, torturers, hell, battles, riots, coronations, and massacres (p. 51). When Julian drew these scenes, he experienced a not only heightened state of tension that peaked in a crescendo of delight but also what Wilson calls a hallucination (p. 51). In this moment, Julian’s experience supersedes the economic logic of the pleasure principle: Pleasure comes not only from the absence of tension, but also from a transformation during Julian’s compulsive recreation of displeasing graphic memes. In the midst of these intimate and fantastic moments, Julian felt he *became* what he drew.

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Wilson's heady description of Julian's impure drawing mirrors contemporary theories of children's play in three primary ways. First, scholars agree that play, like Julian's drawing, is intrinsically motivated (Sutton-Smith, 2005, p. xiii). Next, play produces a positive affective state—it is pleasurable (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005, p. 14). Third, play often involves role switching, in which children reverse societal rules to become the active party (e.g., a child who watches Power Rangers on television becomes the Pink Power Ranger in an episode of social play). This role switching, which may very well be what Little Julian experienced when he became his drawing, is deeply attached to emotive affect. As Wilson explains: "In some drawing of children there seems to be a fit between the art produced and emotions generated during the production" (p. 51). Writing about Little Julian's pleasure, hallucination, and transformation through drawing, he concludes that through "experiencing [which may include repetition in play], individuals learn to anticipate and actively seek out those experiences that will heighten their awareness and move them to desired emotional states" (1976, p. 51). Wilson's proposal moves beyond children's drawings as objects of study to consider the emotional and affective states of children as producers in the act of drawing.

Freud's (1922/1948) contribution to this idea concerns the realization that, while episodes of play, in their completeness, are pleasurable, children do not always choose to recreate enjoyable scenes in their play. In his example of his grandson's "*fort-da*" game (1922/1948, p. 12), Freud postulates that it is in fact,

the traumatic event—the child's mother's leaving (*fort,* or go away)—that the child repeats most in his game, and the child's triumph over it, that is most pleasurable for him. Freud terms this self-soothing a cultural achievement, or a suppression of biological predisposition in service of the regulating affects of culture and the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) a child gains through this achievement. He proposes that children express this mastery through role switching and repetition. This suggests to Freud that children's play may function as an exemplar of something that might supplement the pleasure principle. So, apart from simply transforming pain to pleasure, play might well serves cultural purposes for children beyond mere organizational economy. These purposes range from the gaining and wielding of kindercultural capital (Thompson, 2003) to the exploration of subjectivity through fantasy (Walkerdine, 2007) to the self-soothing deemed necessary by disciplinary structures present in society (McRobbie, 2009). Freud's postulation foreshadows contemporary play theories, which conjecture a variety of both impulses and outcomes for children's self-initiated play.

In her study of children playing video games, Walkerdine (2007) conjectures that theories of understanding children's play must move beyond the Cartesian dichotomy of subject (active) and object (passive) player and viewer. She eschews the split in contemporary children's studies and the new sociology of childhood that asserts children's active roles in interpreting mass media. Finding this opposition, "unhelpful," (p. 5) she proposes interrogating theories of

subjectivity and the typical assumption that the subject (actor) who is making meaning from media is always rational, in control, conscious, and resistant. Drawing from multiple theoretical sources (e.g., Deleuze, 1994; Elliot & Spezzano, 1999; Latour, 2005), Walkerdine argues that "engagement with fantasy and imagination in the making of identity is complex and that the dichotomies of active and passive do not adequately account for it" (p. 11). She continues to suggest that we consider children as players within a landscape that accounts for the "circulation of fantasies within social and cultural practices" (p. 11). In this way, she deftly re-introduces the potentials of irrationality and fantasy in play, without relegating children to the affects of recapitulation theory (Hall, 1897) or effects theories (e.g., Singer & Singer, 2001) that emphasize the effects of media on children's participation in society. Her theories are especially applicable to an understanding of young children's digital video play art, which like video game play, "demands an interaction with the media form" (p. 12). At once, children become directors, actors, performers, participants, players, and viewers. In this complex view of subjectivity, children's productions can simultaneously be rational and irrational as they both subvert and reassert dominant cultural narratives.

Young Children and Digital Video Play Art

In this article, I place my argument at the intersection between Wilson's (1976), Walkerdine's (2007) and Freud's (1922/1948) theories of play and

contemporary theories of children's art (e.g., Thompson, 2003) that account for both children's motivations for art making and the manner in which they incorporate cultural influences in their work. I propose that understanding young children's voluntary digital video art through a coalition between play and art theory might enrich contemporary theories of why children make art. Following Walkerdine, I propose moving beyond typical dichotomies that have characterized study of children's art (e.g., that children's art, and therefore art education, must be either expressive or intellectually enriching, and always rational), and previous methods of understanding young children's engagement with mass media/visual culture memes (e.g., violence, profanity, the putrid) in their visual productions (i.e., children as either dupes or active makers of meaning, not as engaging in multiple, embodied fantasies).

Following Wilson, I choose to consider some of the most pleasurable forms of play for young children; those that seem subversive, at least in part because they threaten images of children's growing cultural achievement, rationality, and regulated participation in culture and society. In this article, I choose to discuss profanity and its collusion with a specific art form: Digital video production. These genres seem to hold tremendous enticement for young (and old) players. As Grace & Tobin (2002) found, children's video productions tended to incorporate and dramatize tropes adults find ideologically unsettling (Thompson, 2003). Using Bakhtin's idea of *carnival* as part of their framework for analysis, Grace & Tobin found the following elements to be a predictable part of

school age children's video productions in an elementary school classroom: Laughter and Parody, The Fantastic and Horrific, The Grotesque Body, and The Forbidden (p. 202-206). As Wilson found with Julian's appropriation of the cultural themes that surrounded him, the videos third grade children produced as part of the curriculum Grace & Tobin developed referenced and in some cases, parodied, the X-men, ninjas, *Beavis and Butthead, Studs, Child's Play*, and *Friday the 13th* (2002, p. 198).

Grace & Tobin approach their analysis from the point of view that little is known about children as the producers of 'video texts' (p. 196). They adopt a semiotic discursive frame, in which young children are positioned as active authors and interpreters of cultural texts. Like Walkerdine (2007), I believe supplementing this frame with a psychoanalytic lens when considering young (preschool) children's voluntary digital video production might illuminate the "manner in which children incorporate the material they observed as spectators of adult art into their own productions" (Wilson, 1976, p. 74). This manner, as Walkerdine has proposed, is relational and not necessarily defensive or rational, but fantastic and pleasurable. Further, it is not necessarily always subversive or subaltern. Active or unconscious meaning making does not always mean resistance. Children's reaffirmation of cultural narratives asserts their ability to participate in multiple cultures and societies.

An analysis of children's voluntary use of digital video, then, has a twofold advantage for this project. First, it may further elucidate children's motivations to

make art by postulating a correlation between play and art making not possible through analysis of other media. Second, understanding children's art through the lens of play, supplemented by an expanded idea about the relation context of subjectivity (Walkerdine, 2007) might well serve to confront and to enrich still-dominant discourses about children's art that relegate art making to isolated, confined purposes (e.g., expression, creativity, individualism, etc.), and understandable purposes (e.g., Cartesian dichotomies about agency or sublimation). These discourses about children's art making, in turn, reflect the historical moments in which they were proposed, as do classical, modern, and postmodern theories of play.

A Brief Introduction to Play Theory and Its Usefulness to Art Theory: Motivation and Fantasy

Wilson's description of Little Julian's investment in drawing, under the framework of the Kreitlers' (1972) theory of tension relief, correlates to several classical and modern play theories: These include surplus-energy theory, recapitulation theory, and psychodynamic theory. They may help to answer these question that Wilson proposes:

> What is the source of tensions in the first place? Do some children have a greater propensity for boredom and its resulting tensions? Do some have more curiosity and greater conflicts? Do some

> children simply need the high continual states of arousal and turn to an activity that through experience they have learned provides that stimulation? (p. 50)

As Johnson, Christie, & Wardle (2005) explain the idea of surplus-energy theory dates to the eighteenth century German poet Schiller's (1794) *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*. The theory is a common-sense theory of play that is biologically based: An organism generates more energy than it needs to survive and so when that energy builds (i.e., tension), it must release it. This happens through play. Recapitulation theory, proposed by Hall (1897), complements Freud's theory of child development. In this conjecture, children recreate the stages of the human race (animal, savage, tribal member) through play, whose purpose is to "rid children of primitive instincts … no longer needed in modern adult life" (p. 35). Following this, Freud (1922/1948) postulated psychodynamic theories of play that serve to be cathartic. As stated prior, one of the mechanisms through which play achieves catharsis is role switching (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). In role switching, the child who was the spectator (or in the case of a negative experience, perhaps the recipient) becomes the actor (or, in the cases I will share, the performer) who can control the situation. As Freud explains, "He was in the first place passive, was overtaken by the experience, but now brings himself in as playing an active part, by repeating the experience as a game in spite of its unpleasing nature"

(1922/1948, p. 14). Wilson writes that for six-year-old Julian, “just looking [at Gustave Dore’s grotesque and sexual images] was not enough. He found that by becoming an activist through producing his own images … his intensity of involvement was even greater” (1976, p. 53).

Johnson, Christie, & Wardle explain that the role-switching works along with repetition, which allows children to manage unpleasant events (such as a punishment) in smaller segments that are easier to psychologically assimilate. Freud, who is less generous in his appraisal of children’s good nature, assumes that this role switching (e.g., in the case of a child reenacting a medical procedure or punishment with another child) allows for a reenactment of revenge (1922/1948, p. 16). Nonetheless, theorists seem to agree that play serves a mitigating function. The transformation from recipient to actor (whether manifest from autobiographic experience or the viewing of media) produces not only pleasure but also adaptations necessary for social and cultural participation.

Freud’s conjecture of role switching and repetition holds special promise for understanding how children play through art that I believe will help us to understand why children make art. Just as Julian Green felt he became what he drew, children who stage scenes using digital video become the subjects of their own playful affections and subsequently view themselves repeatedly as loops are engaging in an activity that is not only pleasurable but that may also give them a sense of agency (which is not necessarily wedded to rational control) over their visual and affective worlds. The young children whose videos I will next share

engage in a creative and re-creative process of choosing images and events from the media culture that surrounds them. Through this process, they assimilate these events into an “enormous visual encyclopedia” (Wilson, 1976, p. 47), and perform in play as actors and spectators of the profane and putrid.

Actor/Spectator: Understanding Children’s Digital Video Art

A four-year-old boy[i] was one of the first children to take to the digital video camera, immediately, as a performer (in other children’s videos), director (of his own staged pieces), actor (in the pieces he directed), and engaging spectator (in the pieces he repeatedly viewed). In the first videos he created, he stood behind a tripod, and acted in front of the screen with action figures found in the play area of his classroom. Using a Flip® video camera, he would record very quick vignettes, and watch them from the viewfinder, make adjustments, re-record, and view, once more, without ever leaving his post behind the camera. After quite a long time of doing so, he made the discovery that he could record himself acting in front of the camera by pressing the ‘red’ button, moving in front of the tripod, and recreating scenes similar to those he had just performed. These scenes ranged from dancing for friends, or imitating media scripts, to those scenes he might generally play out in the play area or outdoor play space but not record. They sometimes involved scatological talk (“poopy!”) and action (making flatulent noises), rough and tumble play, explorations of bodies (Figure 1), and

declarations that seem racist, like “Aw, a Chinese dude.” In the scene that I focus upon here (Figure 2), the boy recreated an altercation between a police officer (one of the action figures in the classroom) and another man (a more ambiguous action figure), in which the police officer repeatedly calls the other man a *pendejo*, Spanish slang for idiot, stupid, or dumbass. The boy began the play episode by positioning the two action figures perpendicular to one another and muttering under his breath. This kind of profane introduction occurred in other videos made by this child and others. In one case, another five-year-old boy knocked over a tower of blocks as if he were wielding a pool cue and exclaimed, “Damn! That was a good one!”

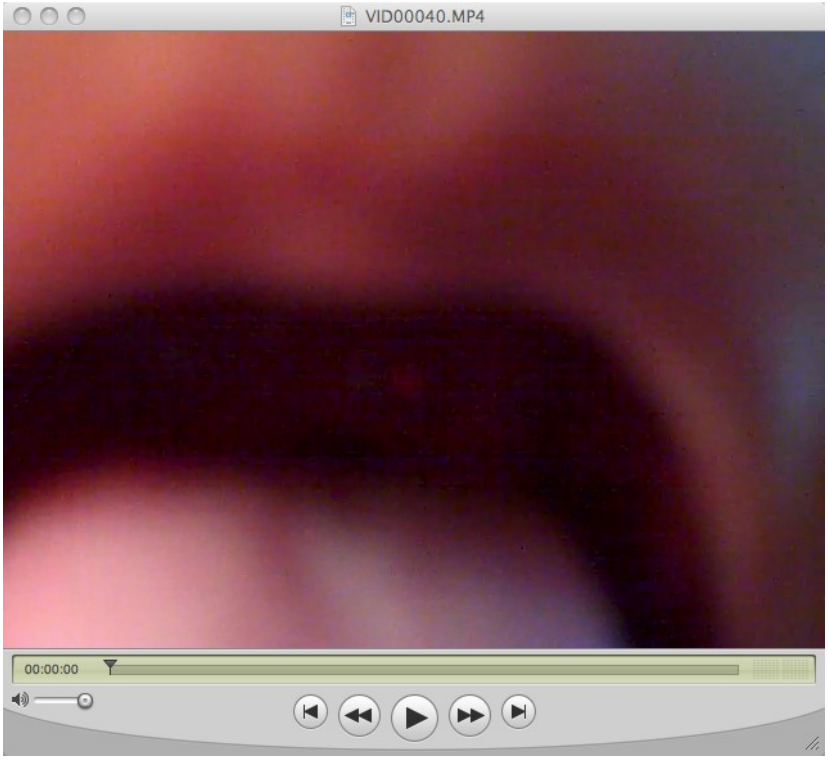

Figure One: A video still from a series in which the children recorded the insides of one another’s mouths.

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Figure Two: A video still (detail) of the two action figures engaged in a confrontation.

It is possible that the *pendejo* piece was first performed for its actor, who functioned as actor and director (e.g., see Carter, 1998). Yet, a friend can be heard in the video saying *pendejo* over and over, while the two giggled. So, social/cultural implications are twofold: First, it is possible that the boy was either recreating a scene he had witnessed in life, or on television. Next, while some of the video performance might have been private, it occurred in a nonetheless public sphere—the classroom. The cyclical nature of the play, like the game of

"*fort-da*" was not only in the performance, but also in viewing the performance. This latter engagement, the viewing, seems to be the source of the most profound pleasure for the children, and was the action most repeated. In this way, digital video loops, perhaps more immediately than drawing, have the potential to be "twice behaved" (Schechner, 1993, as cited by Sweeny, 2008) or repeated indefinitely. This repetition compulsion, then, to re-view, provides a heightened state of pleasure for children, who share in the delight of becoming activists through both performing and viewing. Performing, viewing, and re-viewing—a repetition compulsion—might well assist children in developing a kind of 'mastery' over the media pleasures that seduce them in the face of the school, social, and organization cultures that they easily recognize, even in preschool, that they must assimilate. At the same time, I would like to suggest, following Walkerdine's analysis of violence in video game play, that children's pleasurable relationship to profanity, might well be pedestrian and commonplace were it not typically confined to an adult discourse that represses its significance by overplaying its unlikely dangers. This discourse becomes a regulatory structure in which particular types of childhood attributes are over-valued.

A four-and-a-half-year-old girl was, initially, less interested in directing action with the digital video camera, and more intrigued by becoming an actor in recorded action. She often played with the boy who I just described, punching and feigning hurting him on camera with action figures used as projectiles (Figure 3). The other actions in which she performed range from what might be

considered small snapshots (analogous in a way to snapshots with a still camera) to what we might view as ‘dares.’ In the segment I consider here, her friends who were making the video asked her to lick a water sculpture that was a part of the classroom landscape (Figure 4). Essentially a large globe that rolled through a water bath, the sculpture was meant for contemplation, not for bodily interaction. Ostensibly, the water repeatedly circulated, without being flushed, and was touched by many children throughout the day. Licking this water stood in stark contrast to the civilized table manners the children demonstrated in the two or more meals they prepared and ate together. It also contrasted with the respect that they reliably and pleasantly showed for one another and for classroom materials. The video segment was not only recorded five different times, but also watched several more times. This compulsive re-viewing, then, allowed a resuscitation of the initial pleasure the girl felt in its making; an identification with her and her actions by her viewers; and an affront to the image of the ‘good girl’ most girls strove for and embodied in their classroom, personal lives, and friendships. In this way, viewing the video can be seen, in the extreme, as an affirmation of those sanctioned values as much as it can be a subaltern act.

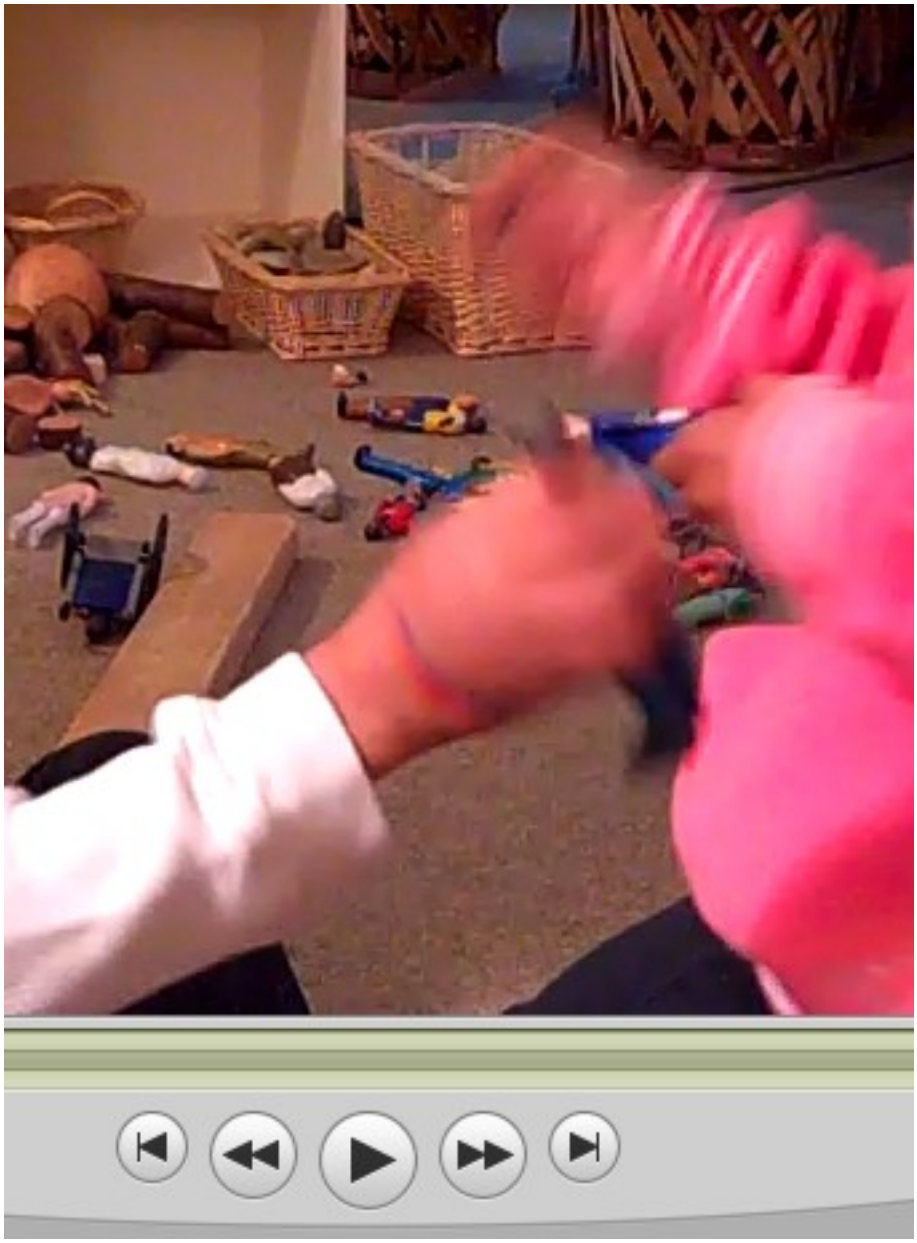

Figure Three: A video still (detail) of a boy and girl engaging in rough and tumble play with action figures.

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Figure Four: A video still (detail) of a girl licking a classroom sculpture.

I have chosen these two actions because they were not only repeated as actions and repeatedly viewed, but also because they represent most emphatically the spectrum of repeated games children invented and enacted, daily, in their digital video production. In the case of the making of each video

piece, children gave attention to themselves as actors and as audience. Like Julian, their initial audience was of often of one (Wilson, 1976, p. 46), but this audience was expanded throughout the social fabric of the classroom. Indeed, it seems that the children's pleasure in their video production became not only more intense through repeated viewing but through shared social viewing, in which classroom customs were simultaneously critiqued and regulated. Further, the children's keen interest in the video pieces I shared was cyclical. There was the fury of acting upon something generally repressed in the classroom; the curious mix of clandestine and public pleasure in repeated viewing; and a predictable waning of interest as other pursuits—many of them neither profane nor putrid—gained fashionable velocity in the classroom collective.

Beyond this, viewing children's digital video productions, and play, in this way might provide a challenge to the idea that children's art is always rational, creative, or expressive. Might children's art making, like their play, be as likely to be unconscious? (Walkerdine, 2007) Its repetition, then, might serve purposes not typically associated with classroom learning or with the positive contributions of art making to intellectual development. Rather, play and art making may be tied to processes of equal or greater significance and pleasure for children, such as playing with boundaries by subverting them or recasting their own identities in fantastic and contradictory ways. If, indeed, the process of play and repetition in digital video making provides children with a safe, supportive, and collaborative site in which they might recognize the polarities of kinderculture and school

culture, then perhaps, such transgression may not be as threatening to the aims of pedagogy as it first seems: In fact, it may even serve to reinforce the cultural boundaries of groups of children in classrooms.

The danger, then, is not in welcoming children's profane play into research, collaboration, or the art curriculum, but in so doing with an impoverished interpretive framework, and censorship rather than support for children. Philosophical and pedagogical perspectives that seek to encapsulate the range of children's composing, acting in, viewing of, and playing with art within restrictive discourses about childhood impossibly limit the range of acceptable identities for children. The normalizing function of these affronts implicitly recolonizes (McRobbie, 2009) childhood and children's visual productions. This recolonization simultaneously offers children what McRobbie terms a 'new deal' in which they must choose to be good to participate in culture and in which pleasure in the profane, fantasy, and multiplicity incurs shame and banishment.

Research as Collaborative Play: Pedagogical Responsibilities

Such transgressions, with notable exceptions (Duncum, 2009; Grace & Tobin, 2002; Grube, 2010; Thompson, 2009, 2010) rarely cross the impermeable membrane of sanctioned, rational, or ideological curricular spaces. As Wilson (2010, personal communication) points out, this may very well be because they

are too dangerous. Given that the motivations for young children's art making often resides outside of both the ethical boundaries of classroom exploration and the cognitive boundaries of reason (perhaps within the unconscious), researchers and theorists of children's art are compelled by a daunting responsibility. Walkerdine's (1997, 2007) research and Ewald's (2000) collaborative photographic pieces illustrate the hazards when an adult lurks within childhood spaces; what Wilson calls the 'underground' (1976, p. 54).

In this collaborative research, which is now entering the end of its second year, children show an extraordinary level of comfort with their teacher and with me as a researcher. This does not mean that our adult roles (or as persons of authority) have been revoked. As is customary in classrooms and close relationships, children seek our comfort, participation, support, and guidance in instances of ecstasy and terror. Because our role does not impose censorship or objectivity, the children seem to act as if they would were we not there (and indeed, they have learned and are fully capable of using the complex camera equipment with finesse on their accord). Their subversive making seems, then, at first blush, to not be in response to our particular presence but rather to be in relation to the cultural narratives that surround them (which, undoubtedly, come from their families, the school, and media culture). Certainly, we are members of the same overlapping and contradictory milieus, and this is not lost on the children. The same children who eagerly greet me with hugs, kisses, and earnest explorations of my shoes, hair, nail polish, clothing, and personal life engage in

profane play seamlessly; directing mashed scenes derived equally, like magpies, from their own personal and cultural lives. Each child, throughout her or his time making with the cameras (often within the space of seconds), recorded pieces both charming and jarring.

Thus, perhaps an alternative approach might emerge, when a researcher's presence is fully known, and she does not endeavor to record the events of art making after their conclusion, but as Thompson (2009) has done, she engages in the research process with children as protagonists—as a player. What is gained and lost in this approach, when children's spaces are shared, and adults function as conspirators in play, rather than as objective recorders or censurers? Might pedagogues be afforded the possibility of assuming a similar stance, in which pleasure, pain, and fantasy and their visual and embodied expression are welcomed in classrooms as significant aspects of the experience of childhood and as rich sources of pedagogical content?

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[i]These scenes come from a larger research project, in which I collaborated with fourteen four-and-five year old children over the course of an academic year. During this time, the children produced approximately twenty hours of unedited digital video and 1500 digital photographs. While I provided the children with technical assistance, I neither suggested nor censored subject matter or content.

In this context digital video production functioned as an example of what Wilson (2005) describes as the “third pedagogical site.” (p. 18). He explains that this site is situated, “between school classrooms and kids’ self-initiated visual cultural spaces—a site where adults and kids collaborate in making connections and interpreting webs of relationships” (2005, p. 18). In this case, digital video production might be analogous to the sketchbooks Thompson (e.g., 2003 discussed) in that they provide a space, or site, in a classroom setting where children’s visual culture interests are indulged, outside of the negotiated site of the curriculum. This classroom is an exemplar of such a site, where the curriculum, is both project-based and child-centered, and focused around issues of Human Rights.