

Decentering the Theater Audience through Reaction Videos

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I question the pedagogical validity of the class field trip to the theater and suggest ways reaction videos might intervene to decenter the theater audience and the theater classroom. Building on Basil Bernstein's work on educational codes as well as the strategies of a postmodern education as outlined by Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, I argue that the traditional theater experience galvanizes an elitist hierarchy antithetical to the purported goals of education. Tracing the popularity of reaction videos online, I then propose an assignment that fits with Jill Bourne's idea of a "radical visible pedagogy" purposed to repopulate the theater audience and expand accessibility to Shakespeare's work.

In all my literature courses, I stress the need for collaborative interpretation; meaning exists in community, not in isolation. Nowhere is that premise more prominent than with dramatic literature. Theater depends on shared witness to realize its potential, and from an academic perspective, watching together provides normalizing cues that help students follow along with the play even when the language might be otherwise difficult to understand. And so, in the summer of 2020, as I was preparing to teach an undergraduate Shakespeare seminar via remote learning technology, I needed to find an alternative means of guiding student comprehension through collective witness. My search led me to *reaction videos*, a feature on social media that foregrounds critical consumption of various art forms. Students would still be isolated and watching productions on their own, but we would be able to magnify and share our emotional and physical responses to the scenes that moved us. As I devised a reaction video assignment, however, something else occurred to me: by moving outside the conventional theater experience, we were potentially hearing new voices. This was an issue of accessibility. Rather than replicate the theater experience, the reaction video assignment might decenter it.

TOWARDS A CREATIVE RESPONSIBILITY

While we spend a lot of time in classrooms reading Shakespeare's plays, there is no substitute for attending a live production. The difference between reading a play and watching a performance is like the difference between learning a second language from a textbook and living fully immersed in that language's culture. Laughter, tears, signs, gasps, applause take an active role in norming a student's critical reception of a performance. Such a shared emotional and conscious engagement within an audience of peers can be a most effective study guide. Shakespeare's language is difficult to read; it is much easier to follow a performance than bounce back and forth between the text and its footnotes. If our goal as educators is to conform our students' aesthetic sensibilities to our own sophisticated palates, then the typical theater experience is just the thing. To the extent a student learns when to laugh and when to cry based on the spectators around them, their access to the play depends on the discernment of the conventional

theatergoer. If, however, our learning objectives aim beyond simple acculturation towards social or political engagement, we must break up the homogeneity of the conventional theater audience and work towards individual creative responsibility.

What I mean by *creative responsibility* merits some attention. Creative responsibility is active and engaged citizenship, taking one's position in the world as both inheritance and legacy. It is what Basil Bernstein (2000) means when he writes, "The first condition [of an effective democracy] is that people must feel that they have a stake in society" (*Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity* p. xx). Education, then, must allow students to manage their stake in society; to do so, Bernstein argues, students pursue individual enhancement, which increases their access to the community, which in turn, provides the opportunity for participation.

The token field trip to the theater, it can be argued, operates on the second of those three levels—access to the community. As I have already discussed, watching a play alongside an informed audience can greatly enhance a student's understanding of what is happening in the play. That such understanding will be normed to the conditions of the conventional theater audience is perhaps an inevitable—even requisite—step in one's initiation into the group, i.e., mainstream culture. However, that inevitability is precisely what demands our attention as educators, or more specifically, postmodern educators who are interested in tracing the power structures that determine one's position within society. We would like our students to see that acculturation happening so that they can interrogate it and potentially reform it. These goals operate on the levels of individual enhancement and participation, by which, following Bernstein (2000), I mean practice that leads to outcomes (p. xxi).

When we take students to the theater, we reinforce the hierarchy between teacher and student, initiated and uninitiated. This is inevitable due to the power of our position and the power of an audience who can afford, or who knows the value of, going to the theater. Power, as Bernstein (2000) argues, always divides and maintains the lines of division (p. 5-6). He goes on to identify what we may call the two main errors in response to this reality: on one end of the pedagogical spectrum, the conservative or fundamentalist viewpoint holds Shakespeare to be a given standard within a set canon, one of the "Great Books" so to speak. Membership and all its privileges can be

earned by developing the right cognitive faculties, practicing the right linguistic skills, and accumulating the right knowledge. Erring on the other end is the elitist, who also touts a canon and demands a cultivation of taste *in order to be one who knows* Shakespeare or other established ideals of high culture¹ (p. 75-76). Both of these perspectives require the preservation of boundaries to prop up their identities. A third option exists, however; it does not eliminate the boundaries but traces the power that draws them.

For Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991), attention to these structures of power is essential for a pedagogy that aims for radical inclusion as opposed to either a purposeful or passive reinforcement of those boundaries. Without analyzing the class trip to the theater and its role in norming our students' taste for high culture, we perpetuate the totemic social distinctions of class, race, gender, and any othered group. We leave unaltered the myth of essential aesthetic value. Postmodern criticism intervenes here to "[show] that the category of aesthetics presupposes a social hierarchy whose key is the description of exclusions, which are imbedded in the compositional conventions employed in the works, not only in the institutions of artistic dissemination" (*Postmodern Education* p. 17). In other words, the institutions that identify and disseminate what counts as artistic quality (such as academia and the theater) are naming as valuable the works that already include the codes of the very exclusion that grants the authority for that naming. Education, for Aronowitz and Giroux, must challenge those gatekeeping mechanisms in order to pursue "the possibilities of a radical democracy" (p. 59). Rather than teaching students to pass for members of the dominant culture, a postmodern education seeks to "challenge the established culture of power and authority" (p. 98).

Similarly, for Bernstein, enhancement and inclusion must be followed by at least the potential for social or political transformation. A

¹ In his study of taste and class, Pierre Bourdieu notes how the self-perpetuating bubble of "formal refinement" sometimes leaves the "uninitiated" feeling excluded from the higher cultural value (*Distinction*, 1984, p. 33). Rather than share knowledge, experts curate the distance between the ignorant and the knowing. Bourdieu refers to members of academia as "the holders of titles of cultural nobility" and compares them to aristocrats "whose 'being', defined by their fidelity to a lineage, an estate, a race, a past, a fatherland or a tradition, is irreducible to any 'doing', to any know-how or function." Without any practical or distinctive skill, they maintain their authority through membership; they "only have to be what they are" (p. 23).

student must not only be inducted into the group, they must also see that their participation in the group might effect its transformation. (Bernstein, 1996). Jill Bourne's concept of a "radical visible pedagogy" may serve as a launching point for my discussion of reaction videos and how they might fit a postmodern pedagogy. Following Bernstein, she iterates the need for learning in community and defines that type of socialization as "an induction into the wider collective, into historically formed ways of knowing and ideally into an understanding of the individual's positioning within, and potential contribution to transforming, the social and political" (p. 61). Her argument for a visible pedagogy combines both horizontal and vertical discourse (Bernstein's terms for the ways knowledge is organized, substantiated, and shared) as well as the attention to power emphasized by Aronowitz and Giroux. She distinguishes visible and invisible pedagogy as follows: "Visible pedagogy is explicit in acknowledging responsibility for taking up a position of authority; invisible pedagogy [...] simply masks the inescapable authority of the teacher" (p. 65). A 'visible radical pedagogy' employs structured, authoritative instruction (vertical discourse) as well as collaborative and communal development (horizontal discourse); students learn in collaboration and through their social interactions, but they also need a directed approach to specialized knowledge or training. What is radical about Bourne's proposed pedagogy is what the vertical discourse purposes. Rather than convert students to "middle-class cultural norms," the goal is "to develop ways of analysing the world and their own position in society, and to 'voice themselves', using—and in the process perhaps transforming—all the discourses available to them" (p. 73). Key to this pedagogy is its visibility, which allows the authority (of teacher or theater audience) to be examined, and its inclusion of student voices, which provides the possibility for participation, in Bernstein's sense of the word.

Reaction videos gives us the opportunity to change the theater audience, to move outside the box of the traditional theatergoer, and highlight the ways our students interact with established voices of authority even as they create their own.

WHAT ARE REACTION VIDEOS?

A reaction video is a performance of conspicuous consumption.² Often in picture-in-picture format, these videos record both the original performance and the faces of the persons reacting. On YouTube, these videos range from parasitic attempts to leech popularity from someone else's work to informed taste-making. The best videos know they are curating taste, establishing a relationship between consuming and creating. They are hype with substance, showing us what is good and telling us why.

Early versions of the reaction video genre relied almost exclusively on shock and surprise; they depended on the reveal, the moment of first-time encounter. These reaction videos aimed to capture authentic emotional responses to various stimuli including gross-out videos, epic plot twists in movies or television series, unexpected reunions with distant family members, and the like. Sam Anderson, writing *The New York Times Magazine* in 2011, describes a viral video of a young boy watching the famous moment at the end of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* when Darth Vader is revealed as Luke Skywalker's father. Part of the interest in watching that young boy's reaction, Anderson argues, comes from a desire to relive the wonder of our own moments of epiphany. "In a culture defined by knowingness and ironic distance, genuine surprise is increasingly rare—a spiritual luxury that brings us close to something ancient," Anderson writes. "Watching a reaction video is a way of vicariously recapturing primary experience." To feel again, sympathetically, what it felt like to learn Luke Skywalker's true parentage is to remember one's innocence—or so goes that particular theory of reaction videos.

In 2013, a new iteration of the reaction video formed around the popularity of HBO's *Game of Thrones*, a show notorious for its tendency to almost sadistically toy with its fanbase by killing off some of the shows most beloved characters. What gave this trend its particular force was the intersection of fans of George R. R. Martin's original fiction and those

² A concept theorized by the social economist Thorsten Veblen, whose study of the emerging leisure class in the late 19th and early 20th century draws attention to the ways prestige and power encircle and promote themselves in a capitalist society. Conspicuous consumption of luxury goods implies a prestige beyond the economic rank of one's bank account or assets. Such consumption applies also to art, literature, and other symbols of high culture. To have good taste, as it were, is to substantiate one's superiority over one's neighbors.

who only watched the adapted television series. So, on the evening of June 2, 2013, as screens were lighting up for the ninth episode of season three, other screens were preparing to capture the inevitable horror of those who did not see it—that is, “The Red Wedding”—coming. For nearly a year after the episode aired, social media gave us voyeuristic access to couches and living rooms around the world. Laura Hudson, in an article for *Wired*, weighs in on the popularity of the GOT reaction videos, noting “an element of both hazing and fraternity” in them. In watching the reactions of others, we see ourselves—that it is normal to be moved by the spectacle, that we are not alone. As Anderson writes in his earlier article, somewhat reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche’s take on Greek tragedy, the experience of watching people watching things gives us “that ego-dissolving bliss of merging with the ultimate source of everything.”³ In shared witness, we find the bonds of community. Such is the ecstasy of theater that we tap into in watching others react to the same stimuli that move us.

Newer iterations of the reaction video genre show a much clearer production of taste. Whereas early reaction videos aimed to register only the basest emotional reactions, this newer evolution actively engages the politics of conspicuous consumption. Perhaps the most popular of these videos center on listening to songs for the first time. A YouTuber will pull up a music video and film themselves reacting to what they hear and see. Often the videos feature newly released music or songs by less-known artists, but the music-reaction genre gained mainstream publicity in 2020 after twinsthenewtrend, the username for brothers Tim and Fred Williams, racked up millions of views for their reactions to hearing Phil Collins’ “In the Air Tonight” for the first time. The aftermath not only ballooned sales of Collins’ song but also saw the twins interviewed by Barack Obama and several major media outlets. It was a surprise, mutually beneficial intersection of consumption and creation. *Rolling Stone* writer Jonathan Bernstein describes the phenomenon as follows: “As they’ve grown in popularity music-reaction channels have become unlikely, profound new arbiters of cultural authority. Much more than feel-good diversions, these videos often draw out foundational connections between seemingly opposed musical styles,

³ As Nietzsche puts it, we hear in tragedy the music of underlying existence: “the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness” (*Birth of Tragedy* 74).

recontextualize older forms of music within a contemporary cultural framework, and toy with larger, loaded assumptions about genre, generation, and race.” Here, in their capacity for revitalizing the rules of taste and their agitation of stereotypes, we begin to see the potential reaction videos might hold for theater and the classroom.

Reaction videos do not simply upend the mainstream audience; in many cases, they reinforce its tastes and values. In her article “The Racial Anxiety Lurking Behind Reaction Videos” (2020), Jody Rosen notes that despite the Williams brothers showing a sophisticated knowledge of music and musicality, a quick scroll through the comments reveals how often the experience of watching their reaction becomes an opportunity for people *in the know* “to cluck their tongues at clueless youths while confirming the supremacy of their own touchstones.” Popular opinion rushes to embrace new members so long as they conform to the status quo. However, unlike the traditional theater experience, which hides the role of peer norming, reaction videos make it impossible to miss. If we want to diagnose the ways aesthetic value is positioned within frameworks of power and means, reaction videos are the x-ray we need.

REACTION VIDEOS IN THE CLASSROOM

Bringing reaction videos into the Shakespeare classroom allows us to recover and emphasize the spectator’s role in the spectacle. It foregrounds both the emotional gut reaction and critical analysis necessary for *getting* Shakespeare, mixing both vertical and horizontal discourse in a way that challenges students to consider their own credibility in making claims about a performance while also engaging with an audience of their own. I argue that the reaction video assignment fits in with Bourne’s concept of a radical visible pedagogy as well as the postmodern interest in assessing the composition and position in society of “electronically mediated popular culture” (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991). At the end of her essay, Bourne calls for pedagogy to “integrate subject knowledge and everyday knowledge” (p. 73), a statement that echoes Aronowitz and Giroux’s two requirements for addressing popular culture: “[There] can be no cultural pedagogy without a cultural practice that both explores the possibilities of the form and brings out student’s talents” (p. 165). Reaction videos allow students to take formal instruction and practice their developing expertise publicly, engaging the

potential for transforming the way a work of art is received and discussed.

When I first conceived of the reaction video assignment, my purpose was to increase student participation and facilitate some exposure to performances of the plays. At the height of the pandemic, our class met only by video conference, so we had no recourse to live performances or feasible way of watching a film together. Through my research of reaction videos, however, those goals, as well as the justification for the assignment, evolved. Not only would this serve to get my students talking, but it would also toggle the onus of classroom authority between vertical discourse (attention to plot, character, scene, themes, etc.) and horizontal (student responses in their own idiom and with their access to cultural values to their peers' reactions).

Before beginning the assignment, we analyze the form of reaction videos, identify their compositional elements, and consider the authority and credibility of the speakers in relation to the content they are judging. We discuss what counts as credible, authentic, good. We assess the value of entertainment in maintaining an audience, and we weigh in on the purpose of the reaction video—is the viewer listening to this music or watching this performance to see something new, or to see something they're "supposed to see"? Are they hyping or deriding the original work? And finally, how does the performance of the reaction video position the speaker in relation to these works of art and pop culture? Once we have established a critical sense of the form, I give them specific instructions for the assignment.

In my Shakespeare seminar, we typically study six plays. The class size is capped at 30. So, dividing the class into six groups gives us roughly five videos per play. I ask each student to create a reaction video to a scene (5 – 7 minutes long) of a filmed performance of a play. Each video must incorporate critical analysis of the performance's formal features, recontextualize class readings of the play, and show the student's 'gut reaction' to the scene. Each video must include an introduction that establishes the student's relative expertise or credibility and explains where the scene takes place in the play and a conclusion that summarizes their assessment of the performance and states whether they would recommend the rest of the performance.

While reaction videos are almost exclusively about documenting first-time or cold reactions to a video, I require my students to do a little more preparation to make sure they can provide some critical analysis

to go along with their emotional response. At the very least, they need to have read the play before choosing their scene. In this format, students are more likely to react on their own terms than they are when accompanied by the beleaguering gaze of their professor. Some students will still strive for “the reaction my teacher wants,” but by encouraging curiosity rather than expectation, the reaction video assignment can open access points to a performance that more traditional discussions limit.

Two additional interventions are key to making this an effective teaching strategy—guided classroom discussion and public-facing distribution. One of the questions I like to include in our guided discussions of student reaction videos gets at two of Bernstein’s educational rights, their individual enhancement and their membership in the community: *If I don’t feel something when I watch this scene, whose fault is it? Is it the performance, or am I lacking?* By considering this, we are able to trace the situations of power and identify our own positions relative to Shakespeare’s position in society. To attend to Bernstein’s other condition for learning, participation, students need to know that what they say matters, has weight to affect the constellations of cultural value (Bernstein, 2000, p. xx). Moving towards this, I ask my students to post their reaction videos to YouTube. Most will restrict access to their videos, but the implication of an active role in taste-making is there.

More needs to be studied and written about reaction videos in popular culture, how they reinforce status quo and operate on popular stereotypes. They also, as with any form of electronic media, have enormous subversive potential that may lead to the active voicing of a new, more diverse audience.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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