

Embracing Materiality

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Drawing on René Magritte’s paintings and Michel Foucault’s philosophical critique of representation, Bingham et al. (“Bingham”) encourage us to embrace the treason of what we teach by disrupting the sovereignty of the signifier. The purpose in committing this treason is to unmask what Foucault called the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of discourse. This is an important exposure because “words do not serve as windows onto things, but are instead active participants in the world.” However, while Magritte was successful in doing so with his paintings of pipes, Bingham shows us how difficult this can be for a teacher to make a similar point through words as he concludes, “one cannot commit treason against words by means of words.” Accordingly, Bingham suggests that we highlight the artifice of the classroom in order to expose how the object of study is always indebted to the sovereignty of the signifier. Going further, Bingham asserts that the school is the ideal context for this treason precisely “Because the educational institution is a bastion for the sovereignty of the signifier.” Indeed, Bingham contends that it is the school’s very saturation in representational practices that makes it all the more likely a candidate for putting the sovereignty of the signifier into question and that we *should* do so “because education has too much allegiance to the reign of the signifier.”

I agree that there is value in exposing “ponderous, awesome materiality” and I think that Bingham has offered some useful suggestions for doing so within the educational context. However, it goes without saying that Magritte is a poor teacher of pipes, themselves; thus if we are to adopt Bingham’s proposal, it will be important to acknowledge that we are less interested in what is presented as the object of study (John Dewey’s book, *Democracy and Education*, in Bingham’s example) and more interested in treason. While I can ultimately accept this as a valid approach within education, I am left wondering where this leaves us; that is, where do we go beyond treason? And I believe that an answer to *this* question ironically lies within another of Dewey’s books — even if its reading might be conditioned by the artifice of a classroom.

However, before showing how this is the case I would like to contribute to the discussion by first looking further into the place that Bingham began his analysis: the realm of aesthetics. Being at the very least one step removed from the strict domain of words, the aesthetic realm has unique potential to complicate the signifier’s sovereignty. Indeed, being squarely situated in the “ponderous, awesome materiality” that we are urged us to recognize, the aesthetic realm provides an arena in which the signifier is less absolute than in the case of language and this affords the possibility for an educational unfolding that follows a different trajectory than the one Bingham describes.

Rather than a class that might read *Democracy and Education*, let us consider a different sort of classroom altogether — one that is loud, often times boisterous, and usually containing an abundance of spit. Welcome to beginning band, an educational environment that I am quite familiar with. I contend that in the beginning band classroom there is a way in which the signifier's sovereignty is quite obviously disrupted. Although perhaps not obvious to the students themselves (who are immersed in coordinating a number of foreign activities) any casual observer will not have trouble distinguishing the gloriously crude sounds produced from what we typically consider to be music. In this way, the sovereignty of the signifier (the idea of music being signified by the sounds produced) is clearly disturbed. And while this is not something the students are necessarily concerned with at the time of their initial lessons, eventually their music teacher will help them to discern the difference between the sounds they are producing and what is more characteristic of music. In fact, as the students gain greater musical skill, they will also gain greater powers of discernment regarding the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of music. Indeed, the ability to make refined distinctions within the material realm encompasses a vital dimension of aesthetic education.

However, unlike Bingham's proposal to intentionally draw out artificiality, the music educator works in the reverse fashion. Hence, initially the beginning band teacher is thoroughly immersed in what is obviously not a sovereign signifier and directs students toward an ever-growing likeness with what we know as music. Indeed, as the students' education unfolds and the signifier becomes more sovereign, this only increases the students' capacity to appreciate the “ponderous, awesome materiality” of music. Thus, although Bingham offers that we come to realize “ponderous, awesome materiality” though the disruption of a sovereign the signifier, this example shows that becoming aware of “ponderous, awesome materiality” does not *require* treason. Despite appearances, maintaining the sovereignty of a signifier and becoming aware of “ponderous, awesome materiality” are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

However, I do not deny that Bingham is right in his contention that treason against the signifier's sovereignty is a powerful means for eliciting awareness of the often-unseen materiality that is constantly at work in discourse. A treasonous example that points even more strongly to “ponderous, awesome materiality” than Magritte's paintings of pipes is John Cage's famous silent piece, *4'33"*.¹ This piece calls for a musician to come on stage and to sit through three movements of “music” that in total adds up to four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. However, rather than absolute silence, what actually emerges are things like the sounds of audience members shuffling in their seats, coughing, white noise, and the like. Thus, Cage's piece takes “ponderous, awesome materiality” to an even deeper level in pointing us directly to the foundation of music: the materiality of sound, itself — the ground upon which all music rests. And this materiality is important because it does work in the world, an influence that we would do well to recognize.

But where are we to go from here? What are we to do with the recognition of this materiality and its power to direct discourse? That is, I want to know how we can put this “ponderous, awesome materiality” back to work for us.

I believe an answer to this question resides in a different book from John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*. Indeed, Dewey also takes materiality seriously, as he distinguishes the dynamic effects of the materiality of objects seen versus objects heard in asserting: “The connections of the ear with the vital and out-going thought and emotions are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator.”² Dewey refers to the materiality of words printed as “fixed and frozen,” whereas once spoken, words become “winged.”³ This is important in order to harness the power of words — in their very materiality — to do the work that we want. And the work that Dewey wants to see done with words is toward a democratic end. Dewey tells us that words must be spoken in order to have full impact within the public: “Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth.”⁴ Hence, while treason is helpful in exposing materiality, Dewey puts this materiality back to work in advocating the importance of words spoken within a local democratic community.

So, indeed, exposing the “ponderous awesome, materiality” of discourse is important. And committing treason against the sovereignty of the signifier is one way of accomplishing this exposure. In addition, I have pointed out how aesthetic education offers a less treasonous approach that also draws out “ponderous, awesome materiality.” But the reason this materiality is important is because of the work it does, and regardless of which approach we embrace I urge that we seriously consider where to go once this exposure has been made. Whether it be toward Dewey’s aim of democracy or another worthwhile aim (should one exist) we ought to put this materiality back to work. Thus, in embracing materiality, we stand to move even further beyond treason itself.

1. John Cage, *4 '33': for any instrument or combination of instruments* (New York: Henmar Press, 1960).

2. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1927/1991), 218–219.

3. *Ibid.*, 218.

4. *Ibid.*, 219.

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