

Thinking What We Cannot See: Performance, Education, and the Value of the Invisible

Stephanie Mackler and Doris Santoro
Teachers College, Columbia University

In this essay we challenge current trends that attempt to explicate all that occurs in a classroom from the point of view of an observer's trained eye. Granted, we have come a long way theoretically from the Archimedean point, where the view from nowhere claimed the only legitimacy in positivistic research. However, even the positioned researcher who contextualizes his or her point of view continues to rely on visible data. In response to the question, "How do you know?" the researcher responds, "That is what I saw, and the following is my interpretation." Further, educational reforms demand that we see results, in the form of test scores or outward classroom behavior. This essay seeks to acknowledge the limitations of our vision and to consider the value of that which we cannot see. We do not seek to uncover the blind spots that we, if we cleared enough of the brush, could have in view. Rather, we attempt to articulate that which never can be seen—that which never can be apprehended visually. This does not mean that we must stop looking, but rather, that we should learn to see differently.

THE LIMITS OF THE VISIBLE

What is visible data, and why should we hesitate to rely exclusively upon it? By visible data, we mean both what we can see literally and, more broadly, what we can represent categorically. We consider the latter part of visibility because what can be seen is often associated with what can be known or perceived as real. To represent something is, in a sense, to make it visible to others as a possible object of reality. That is why we proclaim, "I see it" to indicate that we have understood an explanation, though we have not literally (with our eyes) "seen" anything. Despite the fact that we often associate what can be seen with what is true, there can be a danger in doing so. There are certain aspects of reality that we cannot see. One obvious example is ideology, which often comes up in educational discourse in terms of the "hidden curriculum." Ideology helps us to begin to think about the way that what can be seen is often coupled with values, intentions, and power relations that exist and function precisely because they cannot be seen. While ideology's inherent invisibility points to one potential risk in focusing only on the visible, there is yet another area for oversight.

Drawing from Lacan, performance theorist Peggy Phelan argues that "the relationship between the real and the representational, between the looker and the given to be seen, is a version of the relation between self and other."¹ This is to say that any time we try to represent something and claim it as real, we enter into a kind of subject-object relationship. We are the seers, and what we look at becomes the object of our gaze. Phelan warns that the attempt to see subsumes the Other to the Same: "In looking at the other (animate or inanimate) the subject seeks to see itself. Seeing is an *exchange* of gazes between a mirror (the imagined seen which reflects the looker looking) and a screen" (*UP*, 16). In other words, the seer looks not for what

is other in the Other, but rather, for what is the same as him/herself. The parts of the Other that are most different from the looker will remain invisible, as the looker sees only what s/he chooses to look for *and* what s/he knows how to look for. Inevitably, there are elements of an Other that will not be visible to the looker. The trouble with this is that what is Other (and anything in need of study is always by definition Other) is always new. We cannot have concepts in advance for that which we have never seen before. By looking to see the Same in the Other (or, the old in the new), we not only miss aspects of the real, but we also reproduce the past without regard for what is new in the present. In Phelan's words, "Always failing to keep the real in view, representation papers it over and reproduces other representations" (*UP*, 19).

The "trap of visibility," as Phelan calls it, has implications for how we think about pedagogy because pedagogical experiences are always unique. To think of the Self/Other relationship more explicitly in terms of assessment and representation suggests that the evaluator will understand only according to the categories s/he knows and decides to use. As Mimi Orner, Janet L. Miller and Elizabeth Ellsworth argue

educational practices—research, writing, and pedagogy—are normally representational practices. That is, they are practices that attempt to produce and "contain" excess meaning. Typically, they try to control excessive moments in education through research protocols, proper forms of academic writing, and curricular norms and standards.²

Often, attempts to represent, ignore, and perhaps denigrate, whatever exceeds the methodologies and categories of assessment. In this way, an attempt to see a pedagogical experience without accounting for what is new misses part of what makes the experience what it is.

Likewise, Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth suggest that a pedagogy that does acknowledge the unique and uncategorizable aspects of educational experiences "jams the smooth machinery of reproductive representation because unlike some versions of curriculum, and unlike unsituated pedagogies, it cannot be mass produced, circulated, or universalized."³ We can no longer have standardized, reproducible pedagogical practices once we recognize that each pedagogical moment is unique. Thus, an emphasis on particularity poses a challenge to our current ways of seeing. According to Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth:

Situated pedagogy [pedagogy that is responsive to particular situations] under current regimes of efficiency and accountability, is vulnerable to charges of valuelessness because it honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value that leaves no visible trace afterward and cannot be reproduced. Response-ability-in-context, the awareness of being within a language and within a particular historical, social, cultural framework, leaves no visible trace. Awareness and responding in context cannot be reproduced, represented, or circulated across situations and events.⁴

This poses a dilemma if we agree with the authors that important aspects of pedagogy are always unforeseeable, contextual, and distinctive. One extreme response would be to declare that each pedagogical moment is unique and can be acknowledged only during its brief duration. According to this way of looking at it, we would have to question whether we can even engage in pedagogical research. Is it possible to be responsive to each pedagogical moment without losing a sense of

its value beyond that moment? Is it possible to represent or assess pedagogy *and* to appreciate that it will always contain elements that we are not looking to see?

THE SUSPENDED MOMENT

Elizabeth Ellsworth, drawing from Phelan, gives us a more complex way to understand the pedagogical moment; a look at her understanding of the momentary quality of pedagogy points us toward a way out of the dilemma. In her book *Teaching Positions*, Ellsworth draws our attention to the way that pedagogy is realized or enacted in particular moments. She claims that “pedagogy’s only life... is in relation to its context and moment.”⁵ However, Ellsworth takes this idea further, thus avoiding the possible extremism mentioned above. Ellsworth notes that this moment is paradoxical: it is “suspended” and thus not lodged in any particular moment. She suggests that teaching is “never completed or finished.”⁶ Ellsworth’s work issues a challenge for us to reconcile these seemingly conflicting elements of pedagogy. If teaching is never finished, then there is something more (and hence invisible) outside of the moment. How can that be so? What is “pedagogy’s life?” How is pedagogy related to context and moment without being caught in a perpetual present tense? We turn to Phelan’s concept of the moment to begin to answer these questions.

Phelan’s theory of performance provides a fuller picture of what we mean by “the moment.” Phelan suggests that performative moments are like pedagogical ones, and we extend this analogy to see what we can learn from performance about pedagogy. In general, we use her terms but assume an implicit analogy with pedagogy. This is not to say that performance and pedagogy are always the same, but rather, that for our purposes here the similarities are helpful.

According to Phelan, we recognize a performance because of qualities specific to it that distinguish it as a performance and not as “normal” life. The performance is a moment that is recognizable as a moment because it interrupts the normal flow of life and calls our attention to it as distinct. Further, Phelan asserts that performative moments are incapable of being repeated. She writes, “Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive” (*UP*, 148). A performance, though it might follow the same script time after time, never can be an exact replica of a previous performance.

RELATIONAL MOMENTS

Phelan calls our attention to the specific and local as something magical. This potential is what often provides motivation and sustenance to those engaged in teaching positions. Part of what makes performances unrepeatable is that they are embodied relational encounters. The moment derives its magic and its very existence from the coming together of its participants to create something entirely new. Referring to the performative elements of pedagogy, Phelan writes, “Collectively, the class creates ‘a piece.’ The piece is a statement about each one’s relation—political, psychic, performative, affective, geographical, economic, physical, aural—to the animation of ‘the material’” (*UP*, 173). At times, that piece will feel successful to the teacher and students. Even when the moment feels disastrous, a piece has still been created that is a statement of its participants. Drawing on the same

idea, Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth write, “Performance...makes claims...about what is viable and what is impossible in relation to a particular audience, in a particular situation.”⁷ This is to say that the moment of pedagogy or performance reflects the relations of those engaged in it, and those relations themselves are a kind of creation. Furthermore, it is a testament to the way the individuals become a collective that is productive—that creates. The creation is mediated by the material: a short story, a mathematical proof, a debate addressing historical events. The material becomes part of the collective work of the class as it takes shape through the interpretation and projects of each individual.

However, we still have not gotten away from the possible extreme version of the moment that takes it as so unique that it has no value outside of its particular relations and their enclosure in time and space. Ellsworth’s paradox give us a hint that it is more than this—that there is a larger context. But how? Why does not this amount to pedagogical free love, where teachers and students cruise through schools having meaningless educational encounters? The answer to these questions comes if we look beyond the visible moment as the only arbiter for meaning. We have so far limited our discussion of the “context and moment” to its visible duration, but there is more to it than that.

Phelan argues that performance’s momentary quality offers a unique challenge to visibility: “Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility...where it eludes regulation and control” (*UP*, 148). However, she also gives us a way to understand the elusive realm of the invisible. The value of a performative or pedagogical experience is, Phelan suggests, analogous to the value of a human life. When a person dies, the value of that person’s existence does not vanish. Even our understanding of death and what it entails helps us to value the time we do have with (the physical being of) others. No matter how much we attempt to preserve the memory of a person, it never compares to that person’s embodied presence. In Phelan’s words, “The enactment of invocation and disappearance undertaken by performance and theatre is precisely the drama of corporeality.”⁸ To be human is not merely to be a soul or spirit; if we were pure soul then our death would not carry the impact of the lost presence. Rather, it points to the idea that an essential part of being human is embodiment. Thus, the fact that the performance is particular to a context (time, space, people) means that, once the components of the context are no longer there, the performance ceases to exist.

DISAPPEARING MOMENTS

However, the disappearance of the performance does not mean that nothing remains. A trace is left behind. It is experienced as meaningful, but the experience is not visible or physically present. What is now invisible requires that there be people to note the absence of what was. This is part of the nature of performance: “Presence and theatre are instances of enactments predicated on their own disappearance.”⁹ Phelan illustrates the pedagogical power of disappearance through Sophie Calle’s work. Calle asked workers in galleries and museums to describe artwork that had been stolen or given out on loan. Their descriptions made present

the absent works. Phelan explains, “Calle’s work suggests the forgetting (or stealing) of the object is a fundamental energy of its descriptive recovery” (*UP*, 147). The creativity in Calle’s work ignites when the object disappears. People who looked at the artwork every day, such as gallery employees and museum guards, recalled it differently and did not re-create the objective piece. What did come through in the descriptive recovery was the meaning of the artwork for each person who recollected it. A performance is temporally and visually finite, but its work does not depend on its continued visual and material presence.

To recognize that the performance has an invisible quality is to acknowledge that it must pass—that its moment will end. For the moment itself to have value, we cannot, Phelan suggests, try to repeat or preserve it: “The desire to preserve the performance is a desire we should resist. For what one otherwise preserves is an illustrated corpse, a pop-up anatomical drawing that stands in for the thing that one most wants to save, the embodied performance.”¹⁰ Phelan shows the value of what cannot be saved. While we agree that we should not or cannot preserve the performance, we want to consider more fully how a trace gets left behind and how the momentary performance nevertheless stays with us and makes an impact in the world.

MOMENTS IN TRADITION

We hinted earlier that there is something larger than the moment in pedagogical experiences. The pedagogical moment lives invisibly beyond its duration and connects to something that has come before and that will be in the future. This is because each pedagogical encounter involves material that is always in relation to a tradition. Phelan explains the class creates a moment unlike any other, produced by the relations occurring in that context. However, understanding those relations requires we take the past and future into account. This is most clear when we think of what good teaching entails—a level of coherence that links past to future, even in the most banal of ways. For example, the tradition of schooling, reading, studying history, and an example we will pursue, assigning homework.

We can imagine a teacher who assigns homework so her students can hone a particular skill. For a week, a student has failed to turn in his work. Even in the specific moment of assigning the homework, the teacher may internally note that she will remind this student or perhaps ask him why he has not turned in his assignments. For the student, the announcement of more homework may link up with the past when he mentally notes that he is now five assignments behind and the work is piling up. His past is important: Has he been absent from school for the previous week? Does he associate these assignments with an instance of failure? The way he understands his past in connection with this moment influences how he will address the future. Here we can see that even relatively unremarkable educational situations extend beyond their “context and moment” and reach towards the past and future.

We have illustrated a quite simple moment and how it is suspended. But it would be a mistake if we were to leave our discussion at the individual level. Throughout our discussion, we have emphasized the contextualized interrelations that create the moment. It is not only this teacher and this student that find themselves suspended

in this moment. The complexity of all the students and their histories link up and produce something unique and unrepeatably in this moment. But the entire class's relation is but one moment in this unfinished tradition of assigning homework in schools, and likewise of the tradition of schooling itself. The fact that moments link to tradition does not mean that teachers and students occupy fixed roles in a pre-established educational script.

We turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the festival to see how tradition does not entail blind adherence to things past. Like Phelan, Gadamer emphasizes the uniqueness of each moment: "Inescapably, the presentation [of the festival] has the character of a repetition of the same. Here "repetition" does not mean that something is literally repeated, that is, can be reduced to something original. Rather, every repetition is as original as the work itself."¹¹ Each new festival refers to festivals past, yet is a unique creation in the present. For there to be such a thing as a festival requires that a new festival be celebrated each year. Each repetition, according to Gadamer, creates the festival. This is what he refers to as "the ontological interwovenness of original and reproduced being."¹² In Gadamer's terms, the tradition of a festival enables us to structure our understanding of the present festival. He asserts that it is not the case that there is one time the "original" or "real" festival and that all subsequent festivals are only poor imitations. The fact that this year's festival is to be enjoyed for itself—and not as a memorial to some earlier event—suggests that the celebration is never a literal repetition. These repetitions are impossible without the individuals who collectively breathe life into each new iteration of the festival.

It is important to understand that, for Gadamer, like Phelan, a festival or performance can be enacted only insofar as it has participants who celebrate it. It is an expression of the relations between the participants and the tradition within which they act. Each group will be different from year to year. Even if it is the same people, they will be wearing different clothes, saying different things, have new desires, and hold new grudges. Phelan brought to our attention the unrepeatably relations between individuals and what they create collectively in the moment. She shows how the very disappearance of the moment establishes its value as something that is unique and unrepeatably. In particular, she gave the example of Calle's work to show how what cannot be seen continues to exist in important ways despite its lack of visibility. Gadamer provides another example of an invisible quality that deeply affects our engagement in the world. Tradition, also invisible, underlies and structures how we think about the individual moments that we must value, but that are only meaningful to us within some sort of structured understanding. This structure, however, is not authoritarian.

As we said earlier, the moment is constitutive of tradition in a way that is not a repetition of the same. In fact, it creates and even alters the tradition from which it emerges. This is the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle. Let us take Gadamer's example of portraiture. A portrait is not an exact copy of an individual. A portrait offers a new perspective on its subject because the artist draws our attention to certain elements of the person. This works in the case where we actually know the person. Gadamer explains, "What comes into being in [the portrait] is not contained

in what acquaintances can already see in the person portrayed. . . . Of necessity, what it shows is an idealization, which can run through an infinite number of stages from the representative to the most intimate.”¹³ Each portrait of an individual will look different, but we still know it is the same person. A portrait is like a moment. Both are unique representations and re-creations of something that has a life extending into the past and future. Who the subject of the portrait is to us will now change based on how we see her differently. Just as each portrait changes the person, each moment changes tradition.

As in our homework example, individuals and their actions in particular moments sustain and alter tradition. Each time the teacher chooses to assign homework, she works within a tradition that makes her actions intelligible. If the teacher only engages in a strict repetition of some perceived “original,” then she does not treat her students fairly as Other or the moment as sufficiently unique. She certainly should refer to past situations (tradition) to think through the current problem, but she must take the situation to be new and not an exact repetition of an event past. Likewise, the answer here is not for the teacher to ignore the tradition entirely by ceasing the assignment of homework (of course, that is *an* option), but to recognize how individual cases, each moment, fits into tradition, but is also never finished—never solved or ultimately resolved. Her motivations, her particular style, the kind of work she expects from students, all contribute to the sustenance of the tradition while altering it. An observer, looking only for visible evidence, might be unable to see this dynamic interaction between moment and tradition.

CONCLUSION

We return to Ellsworth’s assertion that “pedagogy’s only life. . . is in relation to its context and moment.”¹⁴ Ellsworth’s paradox draws us into thinking what we cannot see. If pedagogy’s life is in its moment, and if that moment disappears, then we are called upon to think about the power of what does not appear. The moment can be seen, but its value resides in all that we cannot see in it and all that we cannot see that remains after its passing. The give and take between context (tradition) and moment allows for the educative possibility of pedagogical moments. It provides the setting in which change can occur. As teachers, we have to believe that our effects on our students both transcend what we can see and transcend the moment itself. Whether or not we realize it, education depends on the invisible. As observers peering into the educational moment, we must re-train ourselves to think what cannot be seen.

1. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge), 3.

2. Mimi Orner, Janet L. Miller, and Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Excessive Moments and the Educational Discourses that Try to Contain Them” *Educational Theory* 46, no. 1 (1996): 72.

3. *Ibid.*, 85.

4. *Ibid.*, 85-86.

5. Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. Orner, Miller and Ellsworth, "Excessive Moments," 88-89.
8. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.
9. *Ibid.*, 2.
10. *Ibid.*, 3.
11. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), 122.
12. *Ibid.*, 137.
13. *Ibid.*, 147-48.
14. Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions*, 160.