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**Review of Robert Albrecht and Carmine Tabone, *The Arts and Play as Educational Media in the Digital Age*, New York: Peter Lang, 2020.**

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Reading *The Arts and Play as Educational Media in the Digital Age* took me back a few years. In 1970, I started my career in education as a teaching assistant at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Politically and culturally, it was a wild time with the Vietnam War raging, riots and deaths at Kent State University, and the Black Power movement in full revolutionary fervor. Rutgers had an active chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the African-American students on campus were demanding curricular changes and a new campus -- Livingston College -- across the Raritan River in Piscataway. My first-year composition and literature courses had 40% African-American students and this would be my first experience teaching adults.

To prepare myself to walk into a racially diverse classroom in a charged cultural environment, I read Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) and immediately felt myself to be in good company with the authors. I wanted to be a teacher who makes a positive difference in students' lives and motivates them to change the planet for the better -- to be smarter, kinder, more discerning, capable of thinking outside the box. Postman and Weingartner were kindred spirits who guided me through those early years as a university instructor.

Teaching and knowledge are subversive in that they necessarily substitute awareness for guesswork, and knowledge for experience. Experience is no use in the world of Apollo 8. It is simply necessary to know. However, it is also necessary to know the effect of Apollo 8 in creating a new Global Theatre in which student and teacher alike are looking for roles. Postman and Weingartner make excellent theatrical producers in the new Global Theatre." Marshall McLuhan (book review, [www.amazon.ca/dp/0385290098](http://www.amazon.ca/dp/0385290098))

It was reassuring, then, to discover that Robert Albrecht and Carmine Tabone base their arguments -- that exploration of arts and play are indispensable strategies for teaching students in the digital age -- on Postman and Weingartner's early collaboration.

They do more, much more, to extend their analysis into Postman's later, more famous works such as *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), *Technopoly* (1992) and *The End of Education* (1995), and on the writings of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Lance Strate, and other media ecologists. Simply put, they base their case for the arts and play as central to contemporary education on the stratagem of creating counter-environments -- of reversing figure and ground -- popularized by McLuhan and his colleagues. Counter-environments reposition what is usually relegated to the background of signification to the foreground, as McLuhan so successfully accomplished with his slogan "the medium is the message." As media ecologists, we focus on the persuasive effects of the medium and the ways media pre-empt and condition content. The authors write, "Through the cultivation of counter-environments, people are able to stand outside the dominant environment and, from this vantage point, examine more critically the nature of electronic technology, its biases and its societal consequences" (p. x).

While Albrecht and Tabone both teach in the New Jersey public school system and have primary school students largely in mind, they are thoroughly conversant with higher education through their university affiliation at New Jersey City University (Albrecht) and on the Educational Arts Team (Tabone). Their debt to media ecology theory and principles cannot be over-stated. They are thorough and well-versed in their orientation to this method of inquiry. They want to convince readers that a "pedagogy that overlooks the disruptive and often negative influence of digital media on childhood development is necessarily a very short-sighted one" (p. x). Robert Logan and Marshall McLuhan forcefully advanced a corollary to their argument: "Anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either" (2016, p. 85).

While Albrecht and Tabone acknowledge the extensive enhancements that digital technologies bring to education at all levels, they are not techno-utopians who claim technology will

revolutionize learning outcomes. Their position is more balanced, identifying pros and cons, while still emphasizing the need for less individual isolation, fewer distractions, more engagement in student learning, and greater agency through play and the arts. Students need exposure to non-digital, non-electronic, hands-on experiences “to offset and counterbalance” the influence of digital media in children’s lives. Technologies are “never neutral: they are active and transforming experiences...[E]ducational arts build upon a child’s natural tendency to sing, dance, draw, paint, imagine and play” (x).

After my initiation as a teacher in the 1970s, I taught in the humanities before and during the roll-out of the world wide web and graphical user interface (GUI), and was an early adopter of on-line course delivery, video-conferencing, and teaching students how to build websites and play in cyberspace. In the mid-1990s, it did feel like a revolution in the making with instructors, the former sages on the stage, stepping down to become guides by the side as the reigning constructivist wisdom framed it. But ten years later, we began to experience what the McLuhans, Marshall and Eric, in *Laws of Media* called the reversal of the overheated medium. Digital media created a new and exciting performance space that, we now see, has hyper-active powers of persuasion and influence, and was charged up on a business model based as much on distraction as increased productivity. More recently, surveillance capitalism has achieved pandemic proportions, and the attention spans of learners and instructors alike have been refigured into data mining operations. Breakthroughs in machine intelligence threaten to make universities as presently configured into Platonic caves of dark arts and deep fakes.

Albrecht and Tabone divide their inquiry into two parts. Part 1 explores the “theoretical and intellectual underpinnings of pedagogical strategy that is arts focused and biased towards social forms of interaction” (p. 2). To accomplish this, they examine the influence of digital technologies on children, their effects on socialization, and the role of counter-environments in education. Their goal is to convince readers that hands-on experiences in arts are essential for development of children, a common conclusion of many play theorists, from Huizinga, Caillois and Piaget, to Sutton-Smith, Sicart and others.

In Part 2, the authors illustrate how inter-personal experiences support education and socialization. Thus, drama, dance, music, making art, playing games can be used to strengthen orality and teach literacy. In the final chapters, they describe their experiences with

summer camps as counter-environments where children play games, exercise, garden, perform, tell stories, explore, all in a transformative natural environment. Children from urban environments adapt to these natural surroundings without the distracting entertainments of computers, mobile devices, and social media. One can vividly imagine how students would react to losing their digital lifelines! The authors are enthusiastic about the transformative effects of these summer camps, and don't say much about the adverse effects of suspending children's digital addictions. No doubt there are psychologists and medical people on hand at these summer camps to help children cope with the anxieties of pushing the off button on their devices.

Albrecht and Tabone cite McLuhan's figure of the maelström, first introduced in *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's frightening tale written in 1841. They quote Lance Strate (2014) on McLuhan's analogy:

In confronting the whirlpool, we find ourselves facing an overwhelming force of nature, and this is how our media and technology appear to us at first glance, as an irresistible force that is beyond our control, that leaves us helpless to do anything except surrender to its imperatives. But McLuhan argued that there is a way out, and that begins with objective observation of the phenomenon and pattern recognition, with the application of a media ecology approach to develop strategies for survival. (Strate p. 136; Albrecht and Tabone, p. 8)

"Objective observation" and "pattern recognition" are keys to paying attention and surviving the operations of the maelström, and can be practically cultivated in the playful classroom and summer camps. Influenced by Postman, Albrecht and Tabone conclude: "Without more attention, our culture and all its institutions may well be amusing itself to death, distracted by an endless stream of entertainments" (p. 8). To this, I would add that it is not only amusing entertainments that are the problem. We should add more pernicious and consequential effects such as persuasive imperatives, propaganda, false news, misleading advice, jealousy-inducing physical comparisons, inflammatory judgments and hatreds, lack of civility. As Gabor Maté argues in *The Myth of Normal*, we are stressing ourselves to death and living in constant

states of trauma, uncertainty and anxiety. Strate (2014) adds that “the tempest serves as an apt metaphor for our present situation” (p. 136; Albrecht and Tabone, p.8). Synonymous with “disturbance, commotion, uproar and tumult,” the image of the tempest resonates with the maelström to describe what many citizens of the planet report to be feeling.

One shortcoming of the book is its reliance on US statistics and North American educational practises. Casting a wider net for global responses to the digital revolution would be instructive. While the text keeps its focus mainly on North America, the bibliography is more inclusive of non-North American authors and experiences with digital technologies. A wider global perspective would require more complex and nuanced coverage and could distract from the authors’ main intention: to articulate a possible solution to the self-evident problem of North American children being distracted or bored to death in their classrooms. Recall where the authors are coming from -- teaching as a subversive activity.

After a survey of technology use, mainly by children and adolescents in North America (pp 9-12), Albrecht and Tabone summarize three general positions on digital media use:

1. For technophiles, benefits outweigh the deficits. Technophiles, they argue, are insufficiently reflective about digital disruptions and reversals. (pp. 12-13)
2. Teaching media literacy is a more “cautious” approach in which children are taught how to manage digital technologies; to be less passive and more pro-active in their engagement (p. 13). The media literacy approach, however, “is not sufficient for it underestimates the tremendous transformative powers of electronic media. Children not only need to learn how to use media but, more importantly, they need to learn how *not* to use them...It’s not only the abuses of electronic media that need to be addressed but the myriad ways in which these technologies restructure society and redefine who we are” (p. 17). While the authors are securely grounded in the media literacy camp, they want to add their own spin.

3. Media ecology and educational arts combines media literacy with study of counter-environments by exploring psychological, physical, and social spaces away from digital mediation (p.12). “This perspective advocates the cultivation of counter-environments not to eliminate electronic media but to provide alternative experiences that balance and moderate their influence” (p. 18). While the technophiles are fascinated by the beauty of their mechanical love-interest, “a child who has not been sufficiently exposed to orality or to literacy is too easily overcome by the speed and the sparkle of the digital” (p.17).

Steeped in the North American traditions of education, I agree with the sentiment that an education in orality and literacy is important to the advancements we seek, but I am cautious with the argument that we should continue to cleave to those old paradigms (of orality and literacy) when we are becoming increasingly aware of the virtues of emotional intelligence, kinaesthetic communication, and communication through performance and the plastic arts. The authors are equally cautious in their recognition that the summer camps they advocate are much more than training in orality and literacy. Interpersonal interactions (Goffman’s 1959 presentation of self in everyday life) and tactile experiences extend communication beyond the ubiquity of words – spoken or written – and images.

Identifying counter-environments requires an element of estrangement or, to borrow from the dramatist Berthold Brecht (1961), involve an alienation-effect. Counter-environments displace us from our usual vantage points and stereotypes and may leave us wondering where we stand. In this sense, Albrecht and Tabone are reassuring in their subversive insistence on creating counter-environments with art and play. Play is the domain ruled by the trickster archetype and emerges out of ritualized performance spaces. Tricksters such as raven, coyote, Papa Legba, Loki, Krishna, Nasreddin Hodja are trans-cultural figures whose ultimate goal is subversion and cultural renewal. They challenge the status quo to reinvigorate the dynamism and creativity of culture, which all too often stagnates and implodes without reinvigoration.

## A Faustian Bargain

“All technological change is a Faustian bargain. For every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage” (Postman 1995, p. 192)

Weighing advantages against disadvantages of new digital technologies is a rhetorical game we are currently playing with machine intelligence, and something we should continue to do with the incursions of the world wide web, social media, and surveillance capitalism. For every media extension – or new technology -- we should expect, eventually, a reversal if and when the medium becomes overheated. Yes, a worrisome generalization, but it does caution us when confronted by innovations that promise to subvert and revolutionize our engagement with media. In distinguishing between digital “immigrants” and digital “natives,” the authors observe that, “More and more, the interactions of childhood have become disembodied, stationary and mediated by screens” (p. 24). (Many adults experience the same dissonance!) “At least seven countries – Australia, China, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – consider addiction to technology a disorder” (p. 25); that is, a psychological malady requiring treatment: “an illness that disrupts normal physical or mental functions” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, Adam Alter (2017) joins many others to identify a business model dedicated to fostering addictive behavior. Searching for that dopamine rush, the distraction entrepreneurs make a deliberate attempt to create addictive products (digital devices, slot machines, lotteries) without regard for social well-being (p. 27).

Albrecht and Tabone extend their media ecology perspective into the realm of media bias, a framework advanced by Harold Innis to distinguish between the comparative longevity and reach of orality and writing: “Media ecologists often talk of technologies as having an inherent bias...a tendency to be used in certain ways and not in others. Television, for example, has the bias of presenting information in the form of entertaining images to audiences that are typically indoors, sedentary, and passively involved” (p. 28). Television also teaches tolerance of distraction as it continually confronts us with the admonition: “Now for something completely different.” “Television teaches us to jump from thing to thing, to seek constant stimulation, and to space out for hours on end” (p. 28). One could make similar observations about reading – indoors, sedentary, passively receptive, lost in interiority for hours on end – but without all the



externally interjected distractions of electronic technologies. Orality, reading and writing, radio, film and television all provide training for digital immersion. Digital technologies, the authors claim, bias us towards multi-tasking. Television contributed to the “atrophy” of literacy by subverting the extended attention necessary for reading and literacy (p. 30). Nicolas Carr (2011/2020) claims that digital technologies disrupt the concentration required of reading. Instant gratification on the internet – provided by Google search, epitomized by online pornography, and enabled by viral linking and the recommendations of friends – creates an environment of distraction that is as good for sales as for enabling political uncertainty and shenanigans. (See Chris Wylie [2019] on the Cambridge Analytica capers to influence elections in 2016). The authors warn that digitalization of education brings children into an “intimate partnership with computer corporations” and their predatory marketing strategies. This is training not only for work and personal success; it is exposure to corporate practises, values, and ethics. Are you happy with the ethical climate we are seeing in business or politics? The authors have their reservations. They want to subvert that old call-to-arms: “Business as usual.”

Other downsides to immersion in digital technologies identified by the authors, of particular interest to public school teachers, is the atrophy of physical activity (lack of exercise, obesity, diabetes, brain tumors, eye strain, ADHD, depression and addiction, aggression), and social isolation, alienation, and rage. In response, schools should cultivate more face-to-face interactions: conversing, storytelling, performance of dance, music, and art.

The authors conclude their exploration of our current Faustian dilemma – do we trade our souls for knowledge, power, wealth, and influence – or do we foster interdependence, collaboration, discernment, and kindness? And how will these concerns play out in the future?

What will be the social and psychological consequences of artificial intelligence, cloning, drones, genetic engineering, and extensive surveillance? Certainly there will be amazing benefits to all these technologies, but what will be the unintended results? Does anyone really think that all the effects will be beneficial? (p. 39)

## Building Noah's Arks

Essentially, Albrecht and Tabone's approach to subversive education proposes that play be used to create counter-environments similar to McLuhan's and Postman's reversal of figure and ground to perceive media effects. McLuhan's counter-environments are "alternate visions of what is and what could be" (p. 46). Observation and reflection are key to understanding new technologies, but these strategies are challenging to implement because the new technologies and their culture of adoption quickly become the new normal and difficult to perceive; thus, the popularity in media ecology circles of the John Culkin quip "We don't know who discovered water, but we're certain it wasn't a fish" ([quoteinvestigator.com/2013/12/23/water-fish/](http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/12/23/water-fish/)). Albrecht and Tabone quote Postman (1985) to drive the point home: "To be unaware that a technology comes with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple" (p. 157).

Counter-environments allow us to see inside the bubble of normal. (In an interesting parallel, in *The Myth of Normal* (2022) Gabor Maté makes a similar argument about acknowledging the influence of stress and trauma when calibrated against the ground of normal.) For McLuhan, artists teach us to pay -- or play -- attention to things not yet widely seen or acknowledged. Artists are seers who divine the signs of cultural change. Artists, the authors assert, "splash cold water on our faces, they implore us to focus, they try to wake us up. Artists, like the legendary Noah, show us ways to survive the storm" (p. 47).

The authors follow Postman in their belief that the public school system and its classroom teachers are traditionally "agents of balance" capable of creating counter-environments, as McLuhan attempted to do with *The Mechanical Bride* (1951). *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, on the other hand, argues that the purpose of schools is "to subvert attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that foster chaos and uselessness" (p.15). In the half century since I used *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* as a guidebook for university instruction, our culture has rapidly evolved under the influence of television, computers, the world wide web, and social networking to be quite a different educational ecology. In many locations, subversion is not as widely embraced in educational institutions. Books are being banned. Public schools are not

always safe places. Power balances between teachers, students, parents and peers have shifted. Communication has been destabilized in various ways and there is widespread suspicion that public school learning can be challenging to bring into balance. Despite the obvious need, are the public schools really the place for subversive activity in 2023? If my 16-year-old granddaughter is any kind of harbinger, the kids of today are looking elsewhere for their education, and they're holding the technology and its medium in their hands.

The authors provide a good account of Postman's definition of media ecology. For Postman, "A technology is 'merely a machine.' A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates" (1985, p. 84). "A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything" (1992, p. 18). In this formulation, technology is the figure in a ground of accompanying background changes. When the technology dazzles, background changes become noise (Kahneman et al, 2021). As McLuhan and Postman remind us, artists function as our early warning defense against technological displacement and disorientation.

Technology gone wrong has fascinated writers and filmmakers since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and for good reason: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816); Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927); Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949); Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*; Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* and its continuation in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011); the Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) and its sequels; Spike Jonze's *Her*; Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014); William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and *The Peripheral* (2022); Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age*; Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), and the movie version *Blade Runner* (1982) with its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017); Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), *Crash* (1996), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Crimes of the Future* (2022). We have been warned! (p. 51)

[N]ew technologies compete with old ones -- for time, for attention, for money, for prestige, but mostly for dominance of their world-view. This competition is implicit once we acknowledge that a medium contains an ideological bias.... It is not merely a matter of tool against tool — the alphabet attacking ideographic writing, the printing press attacking the

illuminated manuscript, the photograph attacking the art of painting, television attacking the printed word. When media make war against each other, it is a case of world-views in collision. (Postman, 1992, p. 16)

McLuhan thought artists could separate figure from ground to create counter-environments, and thus challenge the dominant narrative:

Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structure and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or counter situations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly....The main obstacle to a clear understanding of the effects of the new media is our deeply embedded habit of regarding all phenomena from a fixed point of view. We speak, for instance, of "gaining perspective." This psychological process derives unconsciously from print technology." (*The Medium is the Massage*, 1967, p. 68)

Constructing anti-environments demands our close attention since we need to tease apart figure and ground, then reverse them. This operation is a complex form of play since we are allowing our body-brain to engage our emotions, which we then have to assess rationally. What to do with these sensations requires decision-making unless we just react spontaneously and impulsively, and often irrationally. (See Kahneman, 2011) As with play, so with paying attention: our cognition is at a nexus, or crossroads, where sensation embraces cognition. They are dancing partners; they clasp hands as partners. That moment of joining hands is the moment we gain or lose, and we want to be playing attention: "In a super-kinetic age dominated by flickering images and constant movement, the fine arts train us to slow down and pay close attention" (p. 53). The authors are joined in this assessment by another thinker much influenced by McLuhan in these matters, Camille Paglia (2012): "The only way to teach focus is to present the eyes with opportunities for steady perception – best supplied by the contemplation of art" (p. vii). Phil Rose (2014), writing on musical counter-environments, extends this argument:

Marshall and Eric McLuhan (1988) explain this tendency through their application of the terms figure and ground, not merely to visual perception, as Gestalt theory had done at the beginning of the 20th century, but to all perceptual awareness. “All situations,” they point out, “comprise an area of attention (figure) and a very much larger area of inattention (ground)” (p. 5). This ground is the environmental domain to which media ecology devotes its focus. (Rose 2014, p. 2355).

Clearly, appreciation for art and its processes are as important to teaching children as it is to media ecologists decoding flickering signals and images. In 1967, McLuhan described the “anti-social” (trickster) role of artists: “The poet, the artist, the sleuth, whoever sharpens our perception tends to be anti-social” (p.88) While this may be over-stating the outsider reputation of artists and subversive educators – perhaps they are playing seriously to encourage cultural change – they are at least rubbing up against social norms that have rigidified into stereotype.

Postman supported education, as do the authors, which would counter-balance the electronic and digital revolutions he experienced. Postman’s “enquiry method” defended literacy for encouraging rationality and discernment, contributing to the analytic management of knowledge; helping students shift from facts, tests, and trivia to asking questions, finding answers to those questions, and making coherent statements. (p. 55) Postman felt this learning had not been accomplished with television and worried that the same neglect might accompany digital technologies in their turn. This is why, and how, teachers need to be subversive. They need to pay attention to the negative effects, even while embracing those technological features that offered genuine advancements in learning.

After the extensive discussion of educational subversion, counter-environments, media ecology, and the ambiguous relationship of digital media to contemporary culture, the authors usefully summarize why the arts matter in the education and socialization of children (pp. 63-67):

1. *The arts encourage motivation and involvement.* Children have a natural tendency to role play. “To sing, dance, draw and play make believe transports a child into experiences that are tactile, active, and intrinsically social... the arts cultivate a different way of being in the world” (p. 68).
2. Inspired by Susanne’s Langer’s work, the authors recommend that educators engage the imagination by embedding feeling into form: “*When children become engaged in the arts, there is a change of heart and a shift in feeling that is tangible in the classroom and visible in their work*” (p. 68).
3. *The arts integrate the brain hemispheres* (p. 69). McLuhan was an advocate of brain lateralization theories, and these theories have become more nuanced and complex since the 1980s with the advent of fMRI technologies. (Della Sala and Anderson, 2012)
4. *Arts broaden social development* (p. 71): “The individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings” (George Mead, 1982; p. 71).
5. Citing Howard Gardner’s *Frames of Mind* (1983), the authors are confident that involvement with the *arts cultivates multiple forms of intelligence* (p.72).
6. Involvement in the *arts support happiness and well-being.* Participating in making music or theatre is more enriching than experiencing them (p. 74). The authors question why children are not singing, acting, making art and dancing “every day in school” (p. 74). “It is indeed an impoverished pedagogy that recognizes the value of technical proficiency and financial success but dismisses the beneficial qualities of doing the arts. Happiness and well-being have been left out of the equation” (p. 74).
7. *Arts provide openings and opportunities to engage socially* (p. 75).
8. In a similar vein, *arts encourage ethical behavior and citizenship.* Threats to these goals include the drift towards totalitarianism, pervasive surveillance, and loss of civility. (p. 75)
9. From cave art to ritual and music, *arts encourage and enhance spirituality.* Education in the arts is a counter-balance to capitalism’s emphasis on commodification. (p. 77)
10. Literacy can be difficult to acquire, requiring discipline and focus. *Arts are portals to literacy* (p. 78)

After putting in place their theoretical armature with its focus on Postman, McLuhan and other media ecologists, Albrecht and Tabone assemble their playbook for the education of children in the digital age. They assert that orality is weakened in the digital age because everyone is gazing into their screens as if they were reading immersive novels – isolated from sociality, elsewhere directed, amusing (Postman) and amazing (Strate) themselves to death. The prognosis is dire; the stakes are high. They propose, instead, an oral curriculum which “acts as an effective counterbalance to the displacement of interpersonal experiences....[T]he oral curriculum helps to mold a set of attitudes and behaviors that are more amenable to the demands of education and a life to be lived in a social environment” (p. 87). In this admonition, they are influenced, first by Postman, McLuhan and Carpenter, and also by Harold Innis’s “bias of communication,” Walter Ong’s and Eric Havelock’s distinctions between orality and literacy. Orality, in this scheme, when juxtaposed to literacy and digital interaction, is a counter-environment applied to the classroom.

Why not practise orality more frequently in schools? Say something rude. Say something charming and respectful. Say something with anger. Say something with forgiveness. That could lead to rousing discussions!

Orality, since sound waves are experienced as fleeting, relies on constant repetition. Oral communication occurs in a lived environment and under particular conditions: “Oral communication also includes music, dance, role play, make believe, synchronized movement, art, architecture, decorations, statuary, processions, parades, the preparation of food, rituals surrounding dining and drinking...” (p. 89). This is indeed a refiguring of the traditional curriculum and gives teachers and students much to do in the classroom (though drinking might not be in the cards!). Strate would approve of this revised curriculum: “Information is stored through all the senses, through the entire nervous system” (1986, p. 243). The authors argue that increased orality in the formative years encourages “patience, decorum, and tolerance that are essential to literacy” and success in school. That these patterns of development will successfully reform distracted, unruly, and disrespectful students must be borne out by personal experience, it cannot be easy to test such observations in rigorous clinical settings. The research of social psychologist Roy Baumeister, for example, provides

insights into the operations of consciousness, free will, decision-making, self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, belonging, interpersonal rejection, and self-control.

(roybaumeister.com/research/, accessed 2023)

The authors observe that Postman and McLuhan, in their description of technopoly, screen culture, and terminal amusement, were advancing observations and probes, not so concerned with proposing remedies. Instead, Albrecht and Tabone are attempting to answer how orality could be taught, how play and the arts can be introduced into the public school curriculum. In their view, the immediacy of social play has been “superseded by a vicarious and distanced digital version” of play (p. 95). The world has become a more dangerous place; it is unsafe for children outdoors or in the streets; news stories cause fear of strangers and other dangers; it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between RL and VR, human intelligence and machine intelligence. Instead, children have play dates, take taxis to school, require adult supervision (p. 95). Perhaps, in coming years, students will increasingly need guidance to discern the real from the fake, the truth from the lie, the human from the machine.

Theories of Play





Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children's Games*, 1560.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna  
Bruegel felt that children's play, in the eyes of God, was  
as consequential as the "serious" work of their parents.

An important element of this text is the authors' review of the myriad definitions of play. While their review is understandably selective, it provides a useful template for their proposed strategies to engage playfully in the education of children. Play is difficult to pin down, rife with ambiguity (Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 1997), but its importance to human society was well-articulated by Johan Huizinga (1938/1955), who becomes an important source for Albrecht and Tabone:

Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play.... The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play

like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it. (Huizinga, p. 173)

As a pillar of civilization in Huizinga's formulation, "play teaches turn-taking, collaboration, following rules, and empathy...[P]lay and creative thought are related behaviors because they both rely on children's ability to use symbols...[P]lay is a significant form of socialization and learning...[B]y doing play, children absorb the attitudes, assumptions, and habits of mind, body and spirit that will guide them as adults" (p. 97).

Clearly, the effective socialization of children and their integration into the resident culture are important aspirations of these teachers. It must be noted that current trends in political and social polarization, wherever they exist, will complicate what children will be asked to learn during their formal education. What they can think and say in Florida or Quebec might be quite different from what they can think and say in Paris or Tehran. Subversive teachers will need to keep a discerning eye on which way the winds of ideology are blowing. Perhaps the new slogan will be "Don't say play!"

Albrecht and Tabone (p. 96) refer to Piaget's 1962 contention that children do not learn through logic or rational thought but through hands-on experiences made possible by the trial and error of play. For Bruno Bettelheim (1975), play is a vehicle for children to explore in symbolic form unsolved problems "which are too complex, unacceptable, and contradictory" to deal with directly (Bettelheim, p. 55; p. 96) In this section, they helpfully provide a list of sources to address the question, "What does play teach?"

Curricular forms of play include storytelling, where the sound from the storyteller resonates in the listener's body, making the story kinaesthetic. (See *The Responsive Chord* [1974] by Tony Schwartz for the power of collective vibration.)

Within the oral curriculum, teachers learn to become storytellers who can reach down and pull out appropriate stories to share with children on a daily basis. Their listening improves, their focus is sharpened, their imagination is stimulated. They learn narrative structure and are moved to ask questions. Stories can be, and should be, repeated: the children will demand it....

Stories are metaphors to live by. (p. 100)

Similarly, looking at and making art are important elements of the classroom at play. Cave art and, later, writing, used the same tools and required the same dexterity, hand-eye coordination, and symbolic transformation:

From a very early age, children love to play with chalk, pens, pencils, paint and crayons. They draw on walls, sidewalks, and in the margins of their notebooks. These kinds of simple activities improve cognitive development, refine motor skills and aid visual learning. Finger painting, sculpting clay and playing with sand are tactile experiences that develop hand-to-eye coordination and support mental growth. Along with scribbling, such activities must be appreciated as important precursors to writing and early literacy. (p. 102)

As advocates for an enlightened public-school curriculum featuring playful activity, the authors are, predictably, concerned that their proposals are taken seriously. They join the ranks of those educators who have had to defend the advantages of play against the individualistic and economic imperatives of those who champion employability, productivity, and careers. In short, educators must ensure that play is not characterized by critics as undisciplined chaos and loss of educational rigor or purpose. Play has its rules and demands self-control; play teaches civility and collaboration; play develops social skills, as well as appreciation for the arts and humanities.

Games are a form of play that comes with a set of rules and procedures that participants agree to respect. If these rules are violated by one or more of the participants, say by a cheater or someone who doesn't pay attention, then the informal contract is broken and the game is abandoned.... Nearly all games...are meant for two or more players and, therefore, are social by nature. (p. 103)

And, in a world that sometimes seems rife with conflict, “Games also require the negotiation of conflict in order to proceed, the ability to wait one’s turn, and an overall respect for group process” (p. 104). Huizinga (1950/1955) emphasizes the orderliness of play and games, thus suggesting that schools — their buildings and playing grounds, their culture of supervision and safety – may be ideally suited for a revised curriculum:

Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, it *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it “spoils the game,” robs it of its character and makes it worthless. The profound affinity between play and order is perhaps the reason why play...seems to lie to such a large extent in the field of aesthetics. Play has a tendency to be beautiful. (p. 10)

The task Albrecht and Tabone lay out before the subversive teaching community requires persuasive theory (accomplished with aplomb), practical applications (many suggestions, continuing development recommended), and political activism to ensure the public classroom is well-funded, not overly subject to ideological agendas and disruption. Appreciating the beauty and necessity of play is a good place to start, and these authors are at the top of their game.

## **Play and Performance**

“At a time when digital media and mobile phones are splintering groups into collections of disconnected individuals, music transforms a room of individuals into a gathering of community (Albrecht and Tabone, p.106).”

The oral curriculum creates a “counter-environment to the overwhelming dominance of digital technology. Orality – the ability to interact within a group, communicate verbally, and develop a repertoire of socially based competencies – is the foundation upon which schooling and the acquisition of literacy depends” (p. 111). As noted earlier, while Postman and McLuhan sounded the alarm about the technological imperative that has cast so many of us, including

Nicholas Carr (2011), into the “shallows,” the authors want to put those warnings and probes into practise, to put some flesh onto the bones of media theory. Their thoughts on drama as a vehicle to teach literacy and social skills – “Drama is a bridge to literacy” (p. 116) -- can also be applied to other performative arts such as music, dance, storytelling, art creation and exhibition.

By using drama as a means of teaching children how to ask questions, absorb new vocabulary, expand attention spans, work in groups, increase their knowledge of narrative, feel confident to exert their voice in public, develop a love of the printed word and write with a point of view, we are in effect preparing children to become fully literate, questioning and critical thinkers. In short, drama in education can act as a transition from habits unconsciously shaped by electronic technologies to a deeper learning that develops a questioning mind and inspires a critical spirit. (p. 116)

Make-believe and character roles give learners insights about social life, self-fashioning, decorum, morals, and ethics. It is perhaps worth repeating how closely aligned in human societies are drama, ritual, and other performance opportunities such as festivals. Carrying out their agenda of putting media ecology theory into practice, the authors provide several excellent examples of drama workshops for classroom use (p. 120-133).

### **Summer Camp as Counter-Environment**

After the thorough discussion of play as counter-environment based on media ecology principles, the authors turn to a description of summer camps they offer to inner city children to give them a chance to experience play and games in an alternate setting. It is notable that nature will play an important role in this shift of play-ground away from built and electrified, cellular- and WiFi-enabled surroundings. The authors introduce their concept of the “seesaw principle” which “understands summer camp as a counterweight to the heavy presence of electronic forms in the play routines of childhood. Too much of anything – academics, athletics, television, computers or whatever — disrupts the equilibrium necessary for a child’s

development... A seesaw functions, and can only function, if there is a counterbalance of similar weight sitting at the other end of the plank” (p. 138). In the seesaw model, the counterweight (play) must have sufficient force to compete with the ubiquitous offerings and distractions of digital environments. One wonders if a week or two of summer camp is enough to unseat the reigning monarch.

I’m reminded of a 6-week training program I attended in the New Mexico desert. A group of us decided to attend a talk by Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) – of *Be Here Now* fame – and one person asked him about the use of psychedelic drugs to experience enlightenment. His response has guided my orientation to drugs and spiritual practises. To paraphrase from memory: “Taking psychedelic drugs may give you a glimpse over the high wall surrounding the sacred garden of enlightenment – so you know the garden exists – *and* you still have to find the door that takes you inside.” It takes a lifetime of paying attention, of mindfulness, to unloose the ties that bind us to misdirection, distraction, (un)certainity, and ignorance. There is more than one emperor with no clothes, and it takes time and vigilance to appreciate how, collectively, distractions and propaganda steal the show.

Despite this cautionary note about summer camps, Albrecht and Tabone are firmly aligned with Kristen Race’s (2016) optimism about using play and games to detoxify the effects of an over-mediated digital environment as envisaged by Postman, McLuhan and many others:

Unstructured outside play is one of the best ways for children’s brains to recover from school pressures and excessive screen media. Inventing games, building forts or just playing a pick-up game of soccer are all ways to not only increase their imagination, creativity, and social skills, but also their critical thinking skills. (p. 139)

New technologies change the nature of play, and the authors want educators to consider using old and new modes of play to engage learners and teach them greater fluency in orality, print literacy, and the newer audio-video, computer-mediated, and networked media. The choice of games and how to play can thus be organized according to the reigning media:

- Prelinguistic: tag, races, hide-and-seek, wrestling, tree climbing, jumping, improvised sword fights, throwing, percussive music, costumes, body and cave painting.
- Orality: riddles, rhymes, song, music, storytelling, chanting, guessing games, sculpture, pottery and material arts, drama and acting, poetry, charades, gossip, radio, telephone, video-conferencing, talking on mobile devices.
- Literacy: writing, printing, reading, fairy tales, illustration, poetry, literature, playing cards, board games, rule books, analogue photography
- Electronic: radio, film, television, computers, surfing the web, mobile devices, computer games, social media, digital photography, influencers, machine learning

Choosing between these different modes of play, educators and learners are brought into proximity with the principles of media ecology: How can we play without speaking or writing? How can we use storytelling, drama or film to tell our story? Where do I find a community to hike with me in the mountains? To play Dungeons and Dragons, Quake, or Minecraft? Play takes us into an exploration of the benefits and limitations of the medium we are using to play in. While the authors are emphatic that too much of anything may inhibit flexibility, they are equally emphatic that educators must be flexible in their choice of art and play to encourage media literacy, which also means understanding media ecology.

There is an additional challenge, and opportunity: the speed of change. "...[W]hereas earlier pre-electronic changes happened quite gradually over a period of centuries, even millennia, and had time to integrate with earlier forms of play, electronic media have emerged so suddenly and forcefully that they threaten to devour and displace other forms of childhood play" (p. 140). Perhaps the rapidity of technological change in our time presents an opportunity to rethink how we teach and learn; what we do in schools; how we interact, share, and collaborate; what games we choose to play, and how we play them.

## **End Game**

Before we make any further summation of Albrecht and Tabone's ideas about art and play in education, it will be useful to recall Huizinga's definition of the "formal characteristics of play":

...we might call it a free activity, standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.... It proceeds within its own proper bounds of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13).

Critics have objected to Huizinga's contention that play is "not serious," even though he is quick to point out that play absorbs the "player intensely and utterly." Following Postman, Albrecht and Tabone are emphatic that play and art in education are indeed serious and deserve our sustained attention.

As a way to bring their arguments to a close, the authors review Postman's interlocking ideas (1992, 7-17), basic principles (1995, 192-3), generative questions (1999, 42-43). For example:

- "All technological change is a Faustian bargain. For every advantage a new technology offers, there is always a corresponding disadvantage" (p. 141).
- Digital play is more individualistic than live, face-to-face play. (p. 142)
- Traditional games are "deeply social" and teach group dynamics: picking captains, division into teams, deciding who goes first, field positions, defining boundaries, playing as a team, penalties, time periods, new players, negotiations, cheating, individuals playing well or not, bullies, leadership, equipment decisions. All games require some degree of negotiation, compromise, and trust. Games have expectations and rules, and we learn to trust our leaders based on how they play their game. \
- Embedded in every technology there is a powerful idea, sometimes two or three powerful ideas (Postman, 1995, p. 192): commercialization, cost of playing; exposure to advertising; surveillance; children groomed to be consumers; social connection, networking, friendship; productivity and efficiency; globalization; agency; influence; and,



the big ones, progress and the future. In digital performance spaces, play is big business and trades in immediate gratification and engagement.

- A new technology competes (makes war) with an older technology for time, attention, money, prestige, and worldview (Postman, 1995, p. 192). TikTok and Instagram influencers, for example, challenge actors, musicians, and athletes for who will become celebrities, demi-gods, idols.
- “The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness” (Postman, 1995, p. 196-7). This point addresses Huizinga’s notion that play is “not serious,” by which he means true play is voluntary and not done for extrinsic profit. The satisfactions of play are largely intrinsic. Are professional athletes or gamblers playing for the money or intrinsic self-satisfaction? In many cases, probably both; but playing for pay tends to muddy the waters of idealism -- another triumph for commercialization and sponsorship.
- Concerning the seriousness of play, Huizinga makes an interesting parallel argument about riddles and ritual:

Culturally speaking, advice, riddle, myth, legend, proverb, etc. are closely connected.... The riddle, we may conclude, was originally a sacred game, and as such it cut clean across any possible distinction between play and seriousness. It was both at once; a ritual element of the highest importance and yet essentially a game. As civilization develops, riddles branch out in two directions: mystic philosophy on the one hand and recreation on the other. (Huizinga, 1955, 110-11; p. 154]

- In storytelling, words stimulate images, encourage symbolic communication, and contribute to the acquisition of literacy. “With oral storytelling, the community re-

appropriates its responsibility to be the one who passes on important knowledge and values to children” (p. 154).

In the Epilogue, the authors reassure their readers that what “[w]e have proposed in this book is not the elimination of digital media but the cultivation of balance” – their seesaw model (p. 162). McLuhan, they remind us, believed that “artists are always building arks for facing the changes at hand” – perhaps their sly reminder that we live in a time of environmental anxiety with some concern that tides may be turning, the waters are rising, clean water and air are precious and required for survival. Neil Postman, they continue, “repeatedly asked schools to step up and confront the ecological imbalances of our technological society” (p. 162).

Finally, they defer to the oral teachings of Plato (Laws, vii, 803): “Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing...” and then humans will be able to honour and pacify their beliefs, their gods, and triumph over their adversaries. The authors rest their case comfortably in notions advanced by Huizinga: that much of play is a contest; that it is useful; that it fosters learning and contributes to personal and social progress. (p. 163)

Together, Albrecht and Tabone have expertly collaborated in this text, skilfully combining media ecology theory with their practical experience as educators promoting the arts and play in public education. They cleave closely to the work of Neil Postman, in particular, as well as Marshall and Eric McLuhan, Lance Strate and other media ecologists, and this provides a rigorous theoretical framework to support their practical agenda. For educators and parents alike, their practical examples of classroom activities and the detailed description of summer camp activities are emphatically worth the price of admission. As they state earlier, they hope to take the spirit and energy of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* and combine it with practical ideas for classroom implementation. The result is more than satisfying – inspiring, well-written and edited, resourceful, engaging, and, despite their decorous and balanced approach, a provocative call-to-arms. Rather, a challenge to play on, make art, teach the children and ourselves.

For many readers, including this one, questions will remain: How will schools accommodate such subversion of current practises? What will it take to counter-balance the imperatives of technological determinism? And how will learners adapt to playing their education like an

instrument as the noise of progress threatens to drown out the sound of birds and children singing? The authors share our concerns: “Is it mad to suggest measures that resist the excesses and disorientations of the digital revolution? Is it insane to courageously open our eyes to see that which is staring us dead in the face? Maybe. Or is it just a bit of foresight and good sense” (p. 163). We should applaud these authors for their good work, standing on the shoulders of giants, and hope with them that what they have written expresses foresight and good sense.

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