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*Response to Keynote Address*

THE BEAUTY OF REPRESENTATION:  
OR, WHAT'S HIP HOP GOT TO DO WITH *THE DAILY SHOW*?

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There is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world. The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Language does not work like a mirror. Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call “languages.” Meaning is produced by the practice, the “work,” of representation.

Stuart Hall

*The Work of Representation*

Michel Foucault once argued that, “there is nothing outside language.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Foucault is too brilliant to deny the possibility of existence outside language, and “nothing” for him does not mean a zero-sum game or non-being. Of course things do exist outside language, but can we talk about them? We cannot talk about them, he would argue, until we are able to “represent” them, make them “available” in language. This is why every representation has excess, a left over, that which is left unsaid. There is no language that is eloquent enough to fully capture “reality.” As Hall put it, “There is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world.”<sup>2</sup> Drawing on these threads, I want to respond to and re-read Megan Boler not from the center, but from the margin: the creative, radical margin. To do so, I will begin by introducing Hall’s notion of representation, discuss Boler’s essay and offer a conclusion that links Hip-Hop and *The Daily Show (TDS)*. This possibility of linking Hip-Hop and *TDS* is what I call *the beauty of representation*: the possibility of thinking and linking elements that, at first glance, has nothing in common.

REPRESENTATION

According to Hall, there are three accounts, theories and approaches to representation: the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist. In the *reflective approach* to representation, also known as the mimetic approach, “meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world” (WR, 24). Here, as Gertrude Stein put it, “A rose is a rose is a rose,” there is no ambiguity or non-reflexivity. Language imitates, reflects, and mirrors Nature. Arguing the opposite case, the *intentional approach* argues that, “it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on

the world through languages. Words mean what the author intends they should mean” (WR, 25). The third, most significant to my argument in this essay is the *constructionist approach*. This is an approach that recognizes the public and social character of language and that “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” (WR, 25). This is because “Things don’t *mean*: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs” (WR, 25). Within this approach, Hall warns us, “we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate” (WR, 25).

Much like Foucault, the constructionists would argue, “it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others” (WR, 25). In the end, Hall contends, “the *meaning* depends, not on the material quality of the sign, but on its *symbolic function*” (WR, 26). That is to say, the meaning *and* what is represented do not exist simply “out there” prior to the representation. The image does not simply *represent*, it *creates* what it assumes to represent or talk about. Put otherwise, words and sounds *stand for*, *symbolize* or *represent* a concept and that concept is almost non-existent—or, in Foucault’s word, is “nothing—outside this symbolic system of representation. And because of this system of signification meaning is conveyed or signified and hence, the corresponding object in the “real” world enters language, being conceptualized, or dare I say being “created”?

#### SO, WHO IS BEING CREATED?

Boler’s essay stands by itself, and any attempt to summarize it will do it a disservice. So, I shall not attempt, instead I want to read Boler’s essay through the theoretical framework of representation I discussed above. I am interested not in what she said, but in the crack, the space between that which was said and that which was left unsaid. Boler’s title is my starting point, especially her idea of the “mediated publics.” Clearly, to be mediated invokes questions of authenticity; that is, if I am mediated, then who am I? Is there an authentic self? Although Boler doesn’t offer an answer, her take on how “the public” is no longer singular offers a satisfactory answer. Because the public is exceptionally saturated by mediatic representation and because “reading” is such an individualized event, she is arguing, we can no longer (if we ever did) assume the public in the singular.

Boler then quoted Jon Stewart, *TDS* host, who talked about “the distracted center” which is “not in charge.” Immediately one has to ask, what is meant by the “distracted center”?; who is in this “distracted center”?; and what

are they not in charge of? Building on Hall's notion of representation, which unfortunately Boler does not make use of, one is safe to say that Stewart is "creating" this distracted center as he is talking about it. He is giving it a language, a label, a texture, and a voice. This is not to say, as Hall had shown us, the distracted center did not exist before Stewart, but, first, it did not have the label and because of this label, second, not only does it exist but in a self-fulfilling prophecy it will *become* a distracted center.

As a Comedy Central show, *TDS* works through the camera and we know the camera does two things. It represents reality more neatly and makes absent that which is present. That is to say, it chooses *a* representation amongst the available representations. Although *TDS* attempts to be "fair and balance" (using the infamous, yet disingenuous Fox News phrase), *TDS* is primarily and unapologetically a liberal, satiric comedy show. Brilliantly, its medium is its satire. Not only does *TDS* poke fun at the media, but it does it by showing its absurdity, especially how media orient their coverage to appeal to "their" (created?) audience. To do so, Boler has demonstrated, the media appeals to its lowest common denominator, thus addressing a particular "public." It was not a big surprise then that the Iraq war happened with almost complete silence from the media; no one wanted to ask the hard questions and thus wrecking the boat of comfort where the media was sailing. I have not looked into this in a systematic way, but comparing the questions asked by the BBC and United States (US) reporters one can see the radical difference. In the US, reporters occupied a cheerleader role (with questions such as: how many soldiers do "we" have, where are they stationed, what kind of tanks they have, how do they live, and so on) whereas the BBC asked the essential question: Why are going to war?

Satiric and intelligently humorous, *TDS* may be closer to the BBC in its repertoire, style and questions (without the BBC formal and confrontation style). *TDS* asks the hard questions, ones that "mainstream" media would do everything to avoid. But it also understands the power of the image. With almost no comments, the image is left to speak for itself in *TDS*. My favorite *TDS* episode is when George W. Bush was shown glorifying Porter Goss (the nominee for CIA director at the time). No more than few months Bush had to distance himself from Goss. The funny thing is that *TDS* showed Bush using "exactly" same glorifying words for the next nominee. This is the *TDS*' attraction; it makes politicians look absurdly stupid. Using archival image, it shows politicians contradicting themselves: what was said this week is not what was said two months ago.

Interestingly enough, CNN seems to have learnt something from *TDS*. The hard-hitting questions that CNN anchor Anderson Cooper was asking during Hurricane Katrina in a segment he called "Keeping Them Honest" were the same questions that *TDS* has been asking for awhile. Politicians could no longer "spin" the truth by telling the American people that all was going

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well—or, they are “doing heck of job” as Bush put it—after the Hurricane struck Louisiana. CNN and *TDS* had the image to show otherwise. The “values” that the Republicans—now controlling the White House, the Congress and the Senate—have claimed to be their truth on earth came bursting when New Orleans levees broke. Post-Katrina, Bush’s *assumed* public, I believe, crumbled before his eyes; it is no longer that simple or possible to talk about “values” without the functionality of those values. Thanks to *TDS*, among others, the majority of the American people increasingly are able to see through (if not consciously resist) the Republicans’ idea of value. *TDS* gave its regular viewers a critical gaze, a critical language to challenge this narrow idea of values. In fact, faced with blatant lies, *TDS*’ regular audience cannot afford to remain neutral, they have to make up their minds, make choices and take positions.

#### SO, WHAT’S HIP-HOP GOT TO DO WITH *THE DAILY SHOW*?

Boler closes her essay with a question on the impact or the relevance of Comedy Central on pedagogy, I want to conclude with a partial answer to that question. My answer is fully discussed in a separate article elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> In it, I investigated and showed popular culture as a pedagogical and curriculum site. In fact, I contended, popular culture is arguably one of the most significant, energetic, exciting, and appropriate curriculum sites to ask and address critical thinking questions. Discussing an ethnographic study I conducted in Canada in mid-1990s, the focus of the article was Hip-Hop. I demonstrated how Hip-Hop became a site of identification, identity investment and language learning. I situated the study with curriculum studies by referring to Elliot W. Eisner’s notion of curriculum. Eisner distinguishes between three types of curriculum: the “explicit” (that which is mandated by the State and students are tested on), the “implicit or hidden” (that which is taken for granted, expected and directly affects students performance but students are neither told not tested on it) and “null curriculum.” Of particular interest to my discussion here, Eisner defines null curriculum as that which is directly related to students’ lives but not taught at the school. He gave the example of popular culture, including Hip-Hop and *TDS*. We know, I argued in the article, that students do not create their identities in the classroom, they do so in relation to popular culture. Popular culture not only impacts their sense of self and identity, but their idea of civic society, their duties and obligation, and ultimately their notion of citizenship. We have to create spaces in the classroom, I concluded, where students are able to bring in their own desires and discuss the spaces where they invest their identities, including their iPods. Nothing is sacred and thus out of reach. This is what Boler might call *pedagogy of desire*, where Hip-Hop and *TDS* are seen as complex spaces linking the word and the world, as spaces of serious discussion, of negotiation, translation, teaching, learning, investment and pedagogy.

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1. Donald F. Bouchard, ed., *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (New York: Ithaca, 1977).
  2. Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 28. This work will be cited as WR in the text for all subsequent references.
  3. Awad Ibrahim, “Operating Under Erasure: Hip-Hop and the Pedagogy of Affect,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 12, no. 1 (2004): 113–133.
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