2. A DETOURNEMENT OF JOE CLARK’S PROBLEMATIC “MOTTO” OF PERSONAL AGENCY IN *LEAN ON ME*

The signature of the situationist movement, the sign of its presence and contestation in contemporary cultural reality …, is first of all the use of detournement.

— Guy Debord, 1959

INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, MEDIA CULTURE, AND SCHOOL FILMS

A substantial body of research exists concerning the assumptions, knowledge, and beliefs that preservice teachers hold upon entering a teacher education program (Wideen, Smith, and Moon, 1998). Much of this research argues that, upon entering programs, most preservice teachers do not have a highly developed critical disposition that questions the status quo and critiques educational policies and the social conditions of schooling. In response to this research, a number of academics have called for those who work with preservice teachers to engage in the kind of pedagogical praxis associated with the tradition of critical reflection—a tradition also signified by phrases such as critical theory, social reconstructionism, and critical pedagogy. Zeichner (1990) explains that critically reflective teachers recognize “the fundamentally political character of all schooling,” and their “reflections center upon such issues as the gendered nature of schooling and of the teacher’s work, and the relationships between race and social class, on the one hand, and access to school knowledge and school achievement, on the other” (p. 59).

Anyone who has this goal of engaging preservice teachers in the processes of being critically reflective first has to answer some fundamental questions, one of which is: What texts will be taken up, and what methods will be used, to create the situations within which critical questions and analyses can take place?” Perhaps the most typical method is to involve preservice teachers in reading, researching, and discussing various print texts (e.g., academic journal articles, book chapters, books, magazine and newspaper articles, online text) that address a range of crucial issues that play out within the national, state, and local spheres of educational policy and practice (e.g., issues having to do with, for example, class, race, gender, language, and power). While examining print texts with preservice teachers is an important
aspect of my own teaching practice, I also typically take up a variety of other texts—
more specifically, I include various “media culture” texts. In conceptualizing the
importance of incorporating media culture texts in education, I have found Douglas
Kellner’s work valuable.

In his book *Media Culture*, Kellner (1995) uses the phrase “media culture” to
refer both to the culture industries (film, television, print media, advertising, radio,
fashion, and so on) and the commodities that these corporate systems generate and
circulate (films, television programs, commercials, CDs, DVDs, radio programs,
newspapers, magazines, video games, clothing, and others). The main argument that
Kellner develops about the significance of media culture texts is that

our current local, national, and global situations are articulated through the
texts of media culture, which is itself a contested terrain, one which competing
social groups attempt to use to promote their agendas and ideologies, and
which itself reproduces conflicting political discourses, often in a contradictory
manner. Not just news and information, but entertainment and fiction articulate
the conflicts, fears, hopes, and dreams of individuals and groups confronting
a turbulent and uncertain world. The concrete struggles of each society are
played out in the texts of media culture, especially in the commercial media
of the culture industries which produce texts that must resonate with people’s
concerns if they are to be popular and profitable. Culture has never been more
important and never before have we had such a need for serious scrutiny of
contemporary culture. (p. 20)

Kellner’s analysis of the great importance of media culture in our society and the
“need for a serious scrutiny of contemporary culture” resonates with an aspect of my
work that has involved taking up selected media culture texts for a variety of critical
purposes. The media texts I have used most extensively have been “school films.”
Generally, I define a school film as a film that in some way—even incidentally—is
about an educator or a student. This broad definition has allowed me to conceptualize
the school film genre as being comprised of well over 100 films. Examples of well-
known school films are *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *To Sir, with Love*. Examples of lesser-known school films are *Waterland*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and *Small Change*. Examples of rather obscure school films are *Torment*, *Zero for Conduct*, and *Maiden in Uniform*. Examples of recent school films are *Elephant* and *The Emperor’s Club*.

I consider these films to be “public pedagogies,” a term that Henry Giroux (2003)
uses in *Public Spaces, Private Lives* in a discussion about the power of media
culture texts in society. In a discussion of films, Giroux articulates one of his central
arguments about all cultural texts, which is that they

work pedagogically to legitimate some meanings, invite particular desires, and
exclude others. Acknowledging the educational role of such films requires that
educators and others find ways to make the political more pedagogical. One