Interpreting Democratic Images:
Secondary Students' Reading of Visual Texts

By William Gaudelli

Today's youth are the first to always have computers, to have nearly continuous access to television, to host blogs, and to use cell phones for multiple forms of communication. They have been called digital natives as they have never lived without computer technology. And the technologies they use deliver what has been called a total media environment of 24/7/365 access to information, entertainment, and communication (Kellner, 2003, p. 105). While media is now ubiquitous and integral in the U.S. and elsewhere, its educative capacity is widely unknown and somewhat suspect. Of particular concern to those interested in democratic schools, specifically though not exclusively social studies educators, is how media forms teach with, about, and for democratic capacities.

Popular television programs demonstrate good reason for suspicion, perhaps exemplified best by *American Idol*. This wildly popular television show, which recently generated more votes than any previous presidential election winner and 609 million ballots cast in one season, reduces civic engagement to browsing a website or texting from one's phone to support a favorite singer (National Public Radio, 2007; Sweeney, 2006). Despite the best intentions of social studies and democratic educators to help students to think deeply, carefully, and with evidence about the social world, they are confounded by a media environment that is predicated on soundbytes, shaky-screens, and instant messages of democracy made simple: *I watch, I vote (or not), majority*

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rules, and that's it. Educators concerned with democratic education of a rich and organic kind ought to take seriously how such superficial messages about living in a democracy undermines the curriculum project they hold so dear.

Though suspicions about popular media's un/democratic lessons are cause for concern, curriculum scholarship about critical media literacy holds great promise for casting light on such superficial renderings (see Evans & Hall, 1999; Gray, 1995; Giroux, 1992; 2002; Kellner, 1991, 2003; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Albert Hastorf and Hadley Cantril's (1954) groundbreaking work in social psychology published in the classic piece, *They Saw a Game*, demonstrated how Dartmouth and Princeton students selectively perceived a particularly vicious football game the previous week. As students watched films of the game, Dartmouth students noted a high number of penalties committed by Princeton players yet not called by the referees and significantly fewer by Dartmouth players. The same pattern was evident among Princeton students who viewed the films, illustrating that visual data is refracted differently depending on one's social location. Though their work was within a structural, positivist empirical paradigm, it resonated with the philosophical inquiries related to semiotics being developed concomitantly by post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes, Jaques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. More recently, critical media scholarship has emerged from semiotics to examine how people decode and make meaning out of social signs.

Henry Giroux (1992, 2002) has carried this line of thinking into curricular circles, suggesting that students too often consume and infrequently critique visual images, the latter being of utmost necessity in the current total media age. Douglas Kellner has similarly taken up this issue in pedagogical terms, arguing that critically reading visual media requires a different skill set which "involves learning the skills of deconstruction, of how cultural texts work, how they signify and produce meaning, [and] how they influence and shape their readers" (1991, p. 79). Research about the curricular nature of media and how it can be critically examined has come largely from outside social studies, however. A notable exception has been the contributions of Walter Werner (2000, 2004, 2006), who provides detailed and comprehensive theory as to the reading of visual media specific to the context of social studies curriculum. His early work examines social studies textbooks as repositories of visual content, arguing for a multiplicity of viewings that sensitize students to representation, voice, mediation, authority, and reflexivity. Werner (2004) contends that classrooms can embody a critical spirit of reading if three conditions are present: the authority to read texts critically, the capacity or skill to engage with them, and a community of peers with which to share and develop interpretations.

A limited number of empirical inquiries in social studies have examined the ways in which students understand historical films. Peter Seixas (1994) interviewed students after viewing excerpts of *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *The Searchers* (1956) and found that they viewed the 1990 film as a true representation of historical events while adopting the film's moral frame of reference yet viewed the 1950s film

as distorted entertainment. Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, and Dan Porat (2001) found that the film *Forrest Gump* was frequently used as a means of interpreting the Vietnam Era by parent/student dyads. Susan Mosborg (2002, 2003) analyzed how students use historical knowledge gained in classroom situations to interpret the daily news, finding that social backgrounds influenced the ways in which they read news about war, worker exploitation, and school prayer. Greg Demitriadis (2000) studied African-American adolescents as they watched *Panther* and noted their use of heuristics from the film as a guide for action and identity when a racial conflict occurred in their town. And I used different data derived from the focus group study examined herein to explicate how students viewed and reconstructed television dialogues about race, finding that students viewed racism as insoluble, interpreted the racial discourse differently according to their race, and yet believed that individual differences of people within racial categories contested the saliency and utility of such categories (Gaudelli, 2004).

The current study builds on previous research and theory in social studies curriculum to address how democracy is interpreted by secondary students through visual texts. I begin with a brief exploration of hermeneutics as a theoretical framework for this work and a sketch of methodology employed in this study. I then present and interpret data from focus groups of secondary students in three high schools who viewed democratic visual texts. I conclude by reweaving insights generated from focus group data around hermeneutic concepts which suggest implications for social studies curriculum. The main question of this research is: What insights about democracy do students construct in light of visual texts?

Hermeneutics and Methodology

What is meant by a visual text? I follow Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Sternberg (1996) in defining visual texts as "any aspect of reality that contains *encoded* meaning" (p. 184). An expansive definition such as this allows for virtually anything to be read as a text, including the architecture of a skyscraper, the landscape of a public park, or advertisements on a passing bus. The term *encoded* is crucial to my conceptualization of visual texts as it suggests underlying meanings that can be analyzed through conversations about a visual text. These conversations, or the data for this study, provide important insights into how students interpret the visual texts viewed in focus groups. Students' efforts to examine democratic visual texts illustrates what they think of the objects themselves, while revealing their interpretations of the larger society and themselves.

Hermeneutics is a philosophy that seeks an open, discursive conversation about interpretation, wherein "assumptions, prejudices, historical interpretations, are continually re-interpreted" such that objective-subjective categories are intertwined (Doll, 1993, p. 127). A variety of philosophical notables, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Whilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and his student, Hans-

Georg Gadamer, along with Paul Ricoeur, all contributed to the development of hermeneutics, though each with a somewhat unique interpretation. Gadamer wrote a widely cited text in hermeneutics, *Truth and Method* (1975/1989). Rather than stipulate a method of hermeneutics, he argues that truth is at odds with method, since when we interpret phenomena, we always become intertwined with the object of our analysis. He draws on the arts to illustrate this point, suggesting that what the author intended in a particular piece of expression both impels the audience to think in certain ways about the art but is always involved in what he calls a *double mimesis*, where "the actor plays and the spectators recognize the forms and the action itself, as they are formed by the poet…the writer represents and the actor represents" (Gadamer, 116).

Hermeneutics thus requires attention to the prejudices of the observer, what Gadamer refers to as *fore-meanings*, a concept that he attempts to rehabilitate from its post-Enlightment degradation. The act of viewing or witnessing action is never truly removed in hermeneutic thought, since when one views a thing, the interplay of the supposed object and the viewer become interwoven. One cannot view an image without in some sense becoming the image. Gadamer, and his mentor Martin Heidegger, view the interplay of subject and object as both a condition of being human *and* an invitation to interpret. The latter part of this condition is the saving grace for people since they cannot escape their own situated knowing. Gadamer (1975/1989), citing Heidegger, refers to this potentiality as the *hermeneutic circle* which is a "description of the way interpretive understanding is achieved…when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our…fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies" (p. 269). Gadamer argues that people are always embedded in the hermeneutic circle, though they may be unaware of it as an ontological state, since the urge to understand is innate at the same time that the ability to discursively interpret may remain dormant.

We often unconsciously refer back to our prejudices to order and explain our world, bound as we are by our urge to understand. Gadamer does not suggest, however, that this renders people incapable of knowing, since the "human mind is too weak to function without prejudices" (p. 275). Arguing that there are "legitimate prejudices" (p. 275), such as pre-judging that which may reasonably cause harm (e.g., picking up a rattlesnake), Gadamer laments a tendency not to recognize and benefit from our prejudicial nature. As prejudices prefigure what we see, perceive, and believe, they are profoundly important in knowing. But we are not doomed by prejudices any more than we are liberated by scientific inquiry. Rather, both point to the need for an endless hermeneutic circle of dialogic exchange, where "*the hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things* and is always in part so defined" (p. 271, italics in original).

Continuous interpretation can result in shared meanings being achieved through authentic conversations where participants truly seek to be changed by an encounter. Such interactions are derivative of Platonic dialogues, which lead to a discovery

not only of what we know but more importantly, of what we do not understand, as an art of thinking (Johnson, 2000, p. 78). Gadamer emphasizes the need for making the strange familiar which is the "true locus" of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 295). He does not seek, however, wide agreement about the matters of life, preferring genuine conversation towards thinking more carefully and in wider audiences about the realities, knowledges, and meanings of life. Important to dialogic unearthing of knowing and not-knowing is hermeneutic thinking that views the whole in terms of its details and the details in terms of its whole. Gadamer referred to this as the *hermeneutical rule*, where "The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed" (p. 291).

The connections between hermeneutic philosophy and qualitative research methodologies, such as focus groups, are abundant. Both are principally concerned with how things are interpreted and how the articulation of those shared interpretations shapes understanding within the group. The hermeneutic circle is a conversation developed by those in dialogue and focus group content is largely determined by the situated participants. As such, hermeneutics and focus groups are both dialogic in process and ends. Finally, both hermeneutics and focus groups regard total truth as illusory, as they aim for limbic understanding in the discursive interplay of shared meanings.

Method

Focus groups ranging from 12 to 30 students in three different high schools participated in the study over the course of three months. Three Florida high schools were selected to represent types in the larger community. I selected an urban high school that received a school aggregate grade of F in 2002 attended largely by African-American students (Jefferson High School[1]), one inner-ring suburban school (Upsala High School) that received a school aggregate grade of C in 2002 whose students were predominately White and Latino, and an outer-ring suburban school (Land Manor High School) that received a school aggregate grade of A in 2002 with a majority of White students and a large Asian-American minority. The focus groups were drawn from a convenience sample of teachers with whom I had a previous relationship. We[2] first visited each classroom for an hour of class observation and provided students with a written and oral description of the study and informed consent letters. Students were shown four visual texts on four separate days.[3] Students viewed and were given a think aloud protocol with a simple introductory statement ("Please use this space to write down thoughts that you have about government, politics, and democracy from watching this video"). I led the focus group discussions and used open-ended prompts such as "Let's talk about what you thought about this video" and "Can we hear additional reactions to____."

Data collection was conducted from January to April of 2003. Student dialogues were videotaped and transcribed in their entirety by my research assistant and data

coding was engaged separately by me and my assistant. We compared individually coded transcripts and adjusted categories through conversation and/or rechecking the focus group video data. I created thematic maps of each conversation as the fracturing of data in categorical analysis distorted the conversational nature of the focus groups. The maps allowed me to textually reconstruct those conversations and allow for analysis of what preceded and followed various comments. Transcripts were then given to the three teachers in whose class the study was conducted. They were asked to provide elaboration and/or clarification of student responses and these conversations were selectively transcribed and analyzed. This process served to clarify working theories about the data based on insights from teachers who knew the students well. All participants gave informed consent, were assured confidentiality but not guaranteed anonymity, and protected by the internal review board of the supporting university.

Jefferson High School was a class of 20 *Advanced Placement English*[4] students in their junior year who had previously engaged in critical media study. Upsala was a magnet program of mainly juniors who chose to enroll in a law-related course that also functions as the student court for the school. Land Manor was a group of mainly senior students who chose to participate in an after-school setting and worked previously on extra-curricular civic competitions with the teacher. All three focus groups were shown the same video excerpts: (1) the inaugural episode of *Mr. Sterling* where a naive outsider becomes the replacement senator from California; (2) an episode of *The West Wing* wherein the administration advocates and loses a massive foreign aid bill in the Senate; and (3) an excerpt of *Wag the Dog*, a satirical film about the creation of a phony, made-for-TV war to distract voters from a presidential scandal. These texts were selected because of their currency and breadth, as each was available just prior to the beginning of the study and addressed a fairly wide spectrum of political matters of the day. I realize, however, that in choosing these particular texts I directed student attention to democracy as constituted in politics and government and that these were visual texts which generally would not be part of students' mediascapes.

When participants are quoted throughout the data section, I leave their speech patterns intact to approximate an authentic rendering of what was said, knowing that all transcriptions are representations of conversations rather than replicas (Kvale, 1996). Further, I include colloquialisms (ex., *gonna*) and grammatically incorrect statements to remind myself and readers that the texts are indeed conversations. All participants were offered copies of an initial draft of the manuscript and asked to make comments, either in writing, via email, or by phone, about any aspect of the study that they chose, though none chose to do so. For the purpose of comparisons between and among schools and visual texts, data and analysis are clustered according to the three visual texts used in this study.

Mr. Sterling

Mr. Sterling is an NBC drama, thematically based on the classic 1950s era film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, which aired from January through March 2003 and was cancelled after just nine episodes. Students viewed the pilot episode which features a governor's son, currently working as a prison teacher, who is tapped by the Democratic Party of California to fill the U.S. Senate seat left vacant by the death of the current senator. William Sterling, Jr. is viewed by the political establishment as a safe interim candidate who will hold the seat only until the next election, and thus, naïve Mr. Sterling is thrust into the high-powered club of the U.S. Senate. He initially fumbles, but quickly gains his footing and begins to assert his authority as Senator from the most populous state. He fires cynical office staff, turns down overtures from corrupt lobbyists, and makes bold statements about the need to be principled above all else. Meanwhile, the media discovers that he is a registered independent, not a Democrat, despite his partisan leanings throughout his life. This revelation causes an uproar among the Democratic leadership of the Senate who assumed this progeny's political affiliation. The leadership is forced to negotiate with the rookie Sterling, which he masterfully parlays into appointments to coveted committees in return for selectively voting with the majority party.

Jefferson students watched *Mr. Sterling* and frequently interrupted the visual text with verbal responses ("he's gonna *get* him!" and "told her!"), mocking laughter (when the upshot Sterling bargains with the stodgy Democratic leadership), and jeers (as Mr. Sterling is told how to behave appropriately). Ms. Wellstone, the Jefferson teacher, suggested that processing out loud was typical for this class, and indeed for the largely African-American student population at the school. Jefferson students' enthusiasm was matched by detailed analysis of the visual text. Toddrick said, "I got a lot out of politics (from this show) that when you get into office you really gotta watch what you say because everyone is supposed to be on your team but everyone wants to be in power because everyone wants power in the end. Politics is run by the golden rule—whoever's got the money can make the rules 'cause they got the power."

The conflation of money and power was raised by a number of Jefferson students, although this was only indirectly alluded to in *Mr. Sterling*. While there were few explicit reference to money in the episode, Jefferson students interpreted the conflict in the visual text completely in economic terms. Some examples include Toddrick's reference to the "golden rule," noted above, and:

> "It's about how much power, how much *money,*[5] how much control over different people you get."

> "Everything they were doing was just about *money*, about more *money*…they don't really care about the people."

> "I identify with Sterling…[he] wasn't just like *rich* and snobby just caring about *money*."

Jefferson students had clear prejudices, or fore-meanings, about the association between politics and money, an interpretation that they inserted into the visual texts despite its relative absence. Why? Art, in this case, was viewed as an affirmation of prior beliefs. Politicians are generally seen by Jefferson students as corrupt, powerful, and selfish, particularly given these high school students' position of living in or near poverty within a largely ignored urban community.

Jefferson's students' readings were not homogenous or without nuance, however. An exchange between Jazelle and her peers demonstrates sensitivity to the fictional quality of the visual text.

> This was artificial because I don't think what you showed us today was exactly what happens in politics. So you just showed us a version of what you all think is in politics or whatever the show is. And I don't think we can really say what we think politics is until we like actually experience something that really happened…. you are just showing us a movie. That's not what really happens.

Jazelle's comment was met with general agreement by her peers, though some heard her remark as a challenge to their general statement about politics being corrupt. Raylean responded that while the details of the show may be distorted, the concept of how money and power leads to corruption remained accurate.

Jefferson students expressed a visceral connection to characters in the sensationalized melodrama, illustrated by booing and cheering as they viewed. These responses prompted me to ask, "Who do you identify with in this show?" Their comments revealed views of what they hoped for yet disliked about politics. Jasleen said, "I identify with Jackie, not just because she's African-American [class laughter] but she was really blunt and honest, really up front about her situation, and got promoted." Dalquon said he identified with Sterling since "He *wasn't a person of politics* and so when he got into office, there really wasn't influence over him, so he didn't go with what everyone else was telling him [emphasis added]." Erakwanda suggested that Sterling's past efforts to help poor people were endearing, "because he was working at a jail and stuff….I think he really cares about people and he's going to be good to have in office." Jefferson students talked about the outsider status, either through the demeanor of characters within the Washington setting, or through people like Sterling. The underdog/outsider narrative was profound in this setting, as students fell easily into the role of the Greek chorus, scorning and cheering at moments that resonated with their narratives of being outsiders in a society of money and power.

The resonance of *Mr. Sterling* was not shared by students at the middle class Upsala High School. Upsala students were generally disinterested in the visual media, though six of the 24 present on this day commented substantially. Where students at Jefferson cheered and hissed, Upsala students were largely silent. In the debriefing discussion, the focus group almost immediately shifted the conversation away from the *Mr. Sterling* text and towards examining why they were not interested

in politics. Their explanations ranged from lack of context for understanding, feeling condescended to by the repetitive quality of television, and being bored by the lack of hostile interaction in politics. Vera explained the lack of context for understanding: "I don't watch this stuff because it is confusing to me. I don't understand half the stuff they talk about, I don't watch it and it's boring." Vandy suggested that she felt politics on TV treated viewers as though they were stupid. "I (try to) watch the news…but after a while they keep on repeating the stuff over and over again. They think we're stupid. They say something and repeat it later changing a few words and after awhile I'll just shut off the TV and be like, *whatever* [with exasperation]." Jorge wished watching politics was more like watching *The Jerry Springer Show*: In Congress, to watch them fight with words would be great if you could understand it…if I could know what they're talking about." The contrasts in how Jefferson and Upsala students read *Mr. Sterling* are informative. While the Jefferson students treated the visual text as a form of interactive theater which spoke directly to their situation as outsiders, stirring them to literally speak back to it, most Upsala students viewed the visual text as just another effort to play on their emotions and draw them into a drama that holds little interest for them. Jefferson students were moved by the melodrama while Upsala viewers were unresponsive.

Land Manor students also focused on the gamesmanship of power evident in *Mr. Sterling* as affirming the inherent goodness in the U.S. democratic system. Land Manor students coined the phrase "bickering by design" to describe how the Framers of the U.S. Constitution played on the competitive impulses of elected officials. The following dialogue illustrates their thinking:

> *Carlie*: Yeah, politics equals bickering you know.

> *Matt*: That's why it was built that way because the Founders knew we weren't gonna play the right card each time. We weren't gonna do the best thing for everyone every time that's why they were at each other's throat all the time trying to figure out what's the best they could do for the most people.

> *Warren*: No, I was saying that it's out of that bickering that you get the ideas that are the best for the majority of people. Like it's a whole slew of ideas that everybody is arguing over and eventually that they are all gonna realize…well, they don't always realize, but they will come to a decision that one idea is probably best for everybody, opposed to helping one small group and another minority group, try to help the majority of people.

Land Manor students, similar to Jefferson, inserted information into the visual text that was not particularly evident. Whereas Jefferson students saw the conflation of power and money, Land Manor students reinvented the visual text to be about bickering over ideas intended for the public good. Land Manor students interpreted maneuvering for personal gain in grandiose terms related to Congress being a free marketplace of ideas. Students redacted the visual text into a categorical understanding of constitutional principles as presented in a traditional civics textbook

along with a dose of competition as a core value. *Mr. Sterling* demonstrated what is *right* about American politics and government for these students.

Land Manor students positioned themselves uniquely in relationship to the visual text compared to the other focus groups, taking on the position of *being* a senator themselves, rather than as an outsider (Jefferson) or disinterested/confused bystander (Upsala). A variety of comments illustrates this positioning:

> "How far will credentials *take you* in the Senate…*every guy* in there has some qualifications and experience for the job. Yet, always the deciding factor is '*Who am I* having breakfast with this morning? *Who owes me* a favor?" (John)

> "Once you're in the Senate, it's all about *who you know*. Who will do this in return for you doing that?" (Matt)

> "Well a large part of whether or not *you get elected* is based on how the media *portrays you* …and so if these senators *don't like you*, they can *portray you* in the media the way that they feel in order to get the people *not to vote for you*." (Warren)

Land Manor students actually placed themselves in the visual text as senators, implying that it was plausible that they might be forced into the drama of *Mr. Sterling*. They employed language in the first person, asked hypothetical self-questions, and wondered aloud about how they would make decisions in similar situations. This tendency demonstrates how the reading of visual texts is socially construed within particular circumstances. Sterling was not an idealized archetype for Land Manor students but an empowered, credentialed person whose social position is proximate to theirs. He is one of them rather than the heroic persona attributed Sterling by Jefferson students.

The West Wing

Beginning in 1999, *The West Wing* presents life in the executive office steeped in drama and intrigue. Students viewed an episode entitled *Guns not Butter* that aired January 8, 2003, about the creation of a massive foreign aid bill submitted by the White House to help developing nations with healthcare, education, and agriculture. The $17 billion package quickly became a lightning rod for conservatives in Congress, who challenged it as a massive give-away to the undeserving world, to which President Bartlet responds that it is an act of goodwill to share U.S. largess and minimize the global rich/poor gap. One legislator, who represented a potential tie-breaking vote, saw this as an opportunity to push his agenda by gaining a foothold for religion in government. He sought the White House's inclusion of a small ($115,000) National Academy of Sciences grant to study the effects of prayers of intercession for sick people. This leads to a conflict within the White House between those who want the aid package, even with a concession to Christian conservatives, and those who are willing to jettison the aid bill to preserve church/state separation. The President ultimately decides not to include the miniscule grant and loses the aid package by a robust margin in Congress. Of the visual texts used

in this study, this was the least interesting for Jefferson and Upsala, but the Land Manor group generated substantial insights about popular opinion, separation of church and state, and U.S. foreign affairs from it.

Jefferson students were ambivalent and confused by this visual text. Sharice's comments typified their response: "It's like all political stuff…we don't know that they are talking about anyway, so we're kind of lost on this one." Rayanne said that she "couldn't follow the dialogue" and students were much less demonstrable in their verbalization as they watched this visual text. Most of the discussion time was spent clarifying questions about the sequence of events such that little analysis occurred.

One area that did pique a few students' interest was the separation of church and state as presented in this film. As we clarified the issue of why the grant for intercession prayer was so controversial, Jamal said, "because everybody don't pray…everybody don't believe in the same thing." Wakesia suggested that "People who are Christian pray and the other people who are other religions are gonna get mad." Both students interpreted praying as the exclusive domain of Christians, suggesting binary thinking about religion as Christian/non-Christian. Ms. Wellstone suggested that in the context of Jefferson, religious diversity was much less likely to be found than in the suburban areas, so the significance of the controversial proposal did not resonate with them.

Upsala students reacted in much the same way as Jefferson, as they were confused by *The West Wing* visual text. Most students compared it unfavorably to *Mr. Sterling*, saying it was "hard to follow" and "boring," an ironic response since most reacted similarly to the first visual text. Jason provided a thorough explanation of references in the text. Cecilia seemed genuinely confused about why the White House would forego a $17 billion aid package for a meager sum of $115,000, stating, "I mean it's a whole bunch of money to give other countries and receive trade and respect in return, even if some people complain about the separation of church and state." Jason replied, "I guess the basic idea is that if you do one thing then you'll build onto that and you'll keep on opening the door…so if you start letting religion in, you'll want more religion, more religion until we become a theocracy." Save this brief exchange about the crux of the visual text, the students were generally unresponsive and disinterested.

Land Manor students, a much smaller group, interpreted *The West Wing* in reference to popular opinion, separation of church and state, and U.S. international relations. Jason expanded on the idea raised in the text that polls indicate an ambivalent and often uniformed electorate, particularly on issues of international relations. Terri read this as contempt for the average citizen: "That one guy said, '9% of the people have their heads up their asses'…it sounds like they are downplaying the people's role in democracy, sarcastically referring to the people in their '*infinite wisdom.*'" Jason also returned to the text, saying that while there was contempt, politicians follow polling data closely "to see how many people like this issue…and decide if they want to support it." He noted the irony that a Democratic administration

was seeking funding to help poor people around the world and yet viewed average Americans as stupid, indicative of elitism.

The conversation about popular will quickly turned to the separation of church and state and student evaluation of the principled stand depicted in the visual text. Jason said, "I have two opinions on that…One, it's like that's only $115,000 compared to *$17 billion*…but on the flip side, you can't start funding religious activity because the government will be deeply involved in faith." Matt elaborated, "He (the President) is very idealistic and I think that's pretty good because he's willing to sacrifice for a greater good. He's trying to do what is right and preserve his dignity." Terri agreed, saying "I think he did the right thing, he remained consistent…there's a very strict separation." Land Manor students regarded principled stands as the pinnacle of democratic leadership. Their response is puzzling since they were not impressed by the principled nature of Sterling in the first visual text. This apparent disparity may suggest that the contents of a principled stand matters more than simply making a stand, as Sterling was obtusely principled about political maneuvering whereas in *The West Wing* a specific law.

Land Manor students spent the remaining 20 minutes of conversation discussing international relations, specifically the problematic idea of spreading democracy and free market capitalism around the world. Most of this conversation revolved around whether it was the place of the U.S. to engage in other nation's internal affairs and the extent to which the U.S. did so in its own interests. John, the lone African-American student in the Land Manor focus group, talked about the continuation of colonialism's infamous White man's burden, as the U.S. "imposes democracy but we're really Americanizing countries…so Iraq is gonna be full of McDonalds, Burger Kings, Texacos, and Exxons." Gerald elaborated on the idea of market intrusion: "It's not so much instituting democracy in a country, [but] only in countries that they [the government] have a vested interest." John suggested that instead of giving democracy, the U.S. should just give aid, which drew Matt's attention: "But if you don't give them some kind of guidance they're just gonna blow that money…we have to watch what they're doing." Brad, articulating a national interest argument, said, "It's about helping your own country…if it's not in our interest, I say leave them alone and let them deal with it." Students clearly had the events of the day on their minds as they watched this visual text, given that this focus group took place in April, 2003 at the beginning of the War in Iraq.

Wag the Dog

Wag the Dog is a feature length film directed by Barry Levinson and released in 1997. The White House and a Hollywood director collaborate to fabricate a war in Albania to divert attention from a brewing sex scandal involving the President. This satirical portrayal of how the media is manipulated by government and the conflation of fiction and non-fiction is witty and contemporary in its references, ironically released at the same time that the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal broke and

the U.S. began a NATO-backed bombing campaign in Serbia. Students in all three focus groups enjoyed this comedy which was substantially edited to fit into a 40 minute viewing time, though their interpretations of the visual text, again, differed substantially. Students at Jefferson enjoyed the satire, suggesting that not only were such cover-ups possible, they were a regular occurrence by an omnipotent government. Upsala's focus group, in sharp contrast, were bothered by the film's suggestion that such manipulation occurs, dismissing the film as unrealistic. Rather than reading it as an indictment of government's misuse of information, they saw the visual text as implicating the media, and made frequent references to the media's depiction of the War in Iraq. Land Manor students viewed the film as a whimsical portrayal of the government that is unrealistic but generally harmless.

Jefferson students asserted that *Wag the Dog* illustrates the omnipotence of the government. Erakwanda argued, "When it comes to war we could never know if they were telling the truth or whether they were lying. They have so much power that they could just make something up…we don't have no way of finding out whether it's the truth or not." She later stated, "The CIA can kill anybody without getting in trouble, without anybody finding out." Jazelle expanded this critique, citing the murder of Chandra Levy and the implication of Representative Gary Condit, who was never charged with her murder, saying "they only show us what they want us to see." Jazelle related this to the Hollywood producer in the film: "Like that guy with the massive heart attack. Yeah right! He didn't have no massive heart attack. They covered up his *murder*." Jayana expanded, saying, "I think the government has like so much power where they can make up something, like the man they left behind in the war [in Albania] and they actually had a funeral for him."

Ms. Wellstone commented on their interpretation of the visual text:

> They love satire and how ridiculous it is. Since they are in *AP English*, they have a lot of this experience already. Look at how many pages (of transcripts) there are. Oh yeah, they love this stuff, it's big humor, it's over the top, it's conspiracy theory, so this is perfect for them. Not generalizing, but in certain aspects of the African-American community, there's a pretty healthy streak of conspiracy theories of various types.

Despite the fit between this cinematic genre and the apparent presumptions of this African-American focus group, there were some who dissented from legitimizing conspiracies. Kevor said, "I don't think in real life somebody can get away with all of that. Somebody have to know something and come out and tell. Somebody gonna tell for the right amount of money." Kevor's attribution of greed and economic gain as undermining efforts to conspire resonates with the group's interpretation of *Mr. Sterling*.

Jefferson students generally sympathetic read of *Wag the Dog* migrated away from the visual text and towards a broader cynicism about politics, revealed in the following exchange:

Wangira: "When [George W.] Bush was running and all those votes got messed up all of a sudden…I think that was a lie. That could have been like a cover-up on TV. I think they cheated and just said it was a miscount of votes and they wanted to count over. He got so much pull, like his dad [George H.W. Bush] and all that. He got so much power.

Toddrick: It's not because of his dad, it's because of his brother [Jeb Bush] is the governor of our state. He has a lot of pull as the governor. Like things that happened up in Tallahassee that weren't supposed to happen and stuff like that and so it's a lot of things that really got corrupted within the government.

Multiple Students: No one trusts the president. I don't trust the President. He lies.

The dark, conspiratorial overtones of *Wag the Dog*, though presented sardonically, clearly resonated with Jefferson students. Talk about the satirical war film quickly migrated into a exchange about how the previous election was rigged to disenfranchise African-American voters. Throughout this lengthy exchange, there were no dissenters, even when I asked for them, only choruses of agreement. The salience of this issue approximately two years after the intensely disputed Presidential Election of 2000 in Florida was palpable.

Upsala responses were nearly a mirror image of those in the Jefferson group. Upsala students disagreed strongly with the film's assertion that government and media colluded to purposely mislead, placing a greater share of the blame on the media as they related the satire to events unfolding in Iraq. Students focused on the unrealistic qualities of the visual text, discussing the impossibility of staging a war, as Donna summarized, "They say a politician will do anything to be elected and I think this [film] really goes above and beyond the 'going to any lengths to be elected' idea. Unlike the Jefferson focus group, there was no discussion of the legitimacy of conspiracy theories among Upsala students.

After a variety of students provided reasons why staging a war was impossible (e.g., logistics, secrecy, collusion), the discussion turned to the then recent beginning of the War in Iraq. Ned argued that the media and government working together in a time of war was a good thing: "The American people don't need to know everything they're doing (in Iraq)." Jason replied, agreeing with Ned's evaluation of the current balance in war coverage, "I think right now the media is doing a pretty good job of keeping the war in Iraq secret, not giving away information when they shouldn't…just saying 'we're outside of Baghdad.'" Donna replied, "I still think that's too much information 'cause they don't need to know 'we're outside of Baghdad.' It's war! You don't need to give your opponent even a clue where you are at." The students use of pronouns such as *they* and *we* indicate strong identification with the military as it embodies the nation. Cecily and Vera were the lone voices arguing against intermingling media and military. Cecily said that too much information about war is "sugar-coated" since we do not see people "getting blown up" and Vera argued that "If we're at war I wanna know everything I can

possibly know…I'd respect the troops more to know what they're going through." Students had difficulty responding to questions I posed about how much should be known about war, told by and to whom, but the truth of information presented during war times, satirized by the visual text *Wag the Dog*, was not at issue in this group. Jason went on to say that the military is most trustworthy in reporting what's happening, since "they're the ones fighting so they should know the most factual information," rather than the media.

Upsala students, like those at Jefferson, did not trust the media, though on different grounds. Their distrust stemmed from a fear of media revealing too much while Jefferson students feared the media revealing too little. The context of Upsala provides some insight as to why this difference may exist. Upsala High School, at the time of this study, had a junior officer in training program in which participating students wore uniforms to school one day a week, had showcases in the main office of alumni currently serving in the military, and participated in a partnership with a local university and military contractor to offer courses in military simulations. Upsala students' interpretation that a conspiracy involving the military was absurd is congruent with the larger pro-military culture in which the high school is situated.

Land Manor's focus group was a bit less serious in how they reacted to *Wag the Dog*, reading it as only a whimsical movie. Tanner provided a summary of the film, saying, "That kind of thing just couldn't happen in real life. It was just a farce, but it was a good satire…if that really happened, everything in there would eventually come out." Terri agreed that it was unrealistic to have such a massive cover-up, though some manipulation by the media about war does occur. "There's a difference between propaganda and outright scamming us. Propaganda is more like taking the truth and twisting it to make it look like it's favorable to us, but usually there's still a grain of truth, instead of creating a war that didn't exist." Mark suggested that the one element of truth in the film was about the point of getting people riled up to support a war goes beyond satire: "The media basically controls and manipulates the minds of the youth." Students interpreted *Wag the Dog* using the language of the War in Iraq, similar to the Upsala group. They spoke of "embedded reporters" delivering truth, though contrived, from the frontlines and valued this addition to the mediascape. The wider media context of April, 2003 clearly shaped student reading of this visual text.

Synthetic Analysis:
Double Mimesis, Dialogic Encounters, and Prejudices

A variety of points are particularly resonant in light of hermeneutic concepts introduced previously, namely double mimesis, prejudice, and dialogic encounters guide the following synthetic analysis that offers ways of thinking about social studies teaching in light of this study.

Double Mimesis

Students in all focus groups became intertwined with the objects of their analyses in diverse ways that were variously congruent with their social contexts and identities. The visual texts served as mirrors to reflect and amplify dimensions of student experiences in schools, communities, and the larger world. Though I presented data in such a way as to maintain the distinction between viewer and viewed, the distinction falls away as the experience of viewing embodies both the one viewing and that being viewed into an experiential whole. It might be inviting to infer from this study that the subject totalizes the object, or takes it in to such a degree as to make it uniquely and completely their own. Such an extreme interpretation, however, is not in sync either with the data or a hermeneutic lens. Just as it would be misleading to suggest that the visual texts imprinted totally on the minds of participants, it would be equally invalid to say that participant interpretations were completely their own. The intersection of viewer and viewed as a new whole is more accurate, or what Charles Suhor (1984) has called transmediation.

The fact that students mediated the visual texts does not indicate a complete reconstruction of the text, however, as both the text and the person interpreting the text are historically rooted and socially situated. Jefferson students, for example, spoke of conspiracy and corruption in reading *Wag the Dog*, and as Ms. Wellstone noted, this indicates a fair amount of cynicism on the part of African-Americans given a history of oppression. Upsala students read the same text as offensive drivel and proof that the media is not to be trusted in matters of national security, which also connects with the relative, if moderate, privilege of these students. Land Manor students read the "bickering by design" of *Mr. Sterling* as yet another example of American democracy as the *sin qua non* of human governance. Yet, none of these reading were "free and arbitrary" (Gadamer, 1975/1989, p. 117), so as to consider things completely other than what was presented.

Social studies teaching is often premised on the implicit belief that students will *read texts* in certain ways. Common social studies tropes include statements like the Cold War as victory of free market capitalism over alternatives, genocide as an exemplar of human capacity for depraved acts of inhumanity, and American democracy as the pinnacle of governance. In light of this inquiry, while curriculum can be said to have valence in directing students attention in certain ways about certain content, the conclusion that such lessons will wholly *imprint* upon students discounts their agency as readers of visual texts. In Gadamer's sense, such pedagogy denies the historical and social location of the viewer since the text is positioned as the only authorized narrative, which implicitly denies the historical vision and occlusion of the viewers. This inquiry suggests that students are both directed and directive through their encounters with curriculum objects and that social studies pedagogy needs to cherish and benefit from such historically mediated viewing by students. As students see that their social locations mediate their viewing of texts, they are developing critical media skills that may migrate to other curriculum areas, and indeed, their lives.

Dialogic Encounters

Visual texts offer great potential to foster dialogic encounters among students. Focus group conversations were characterized by a free exchange of ideas, despite the fact that they were led by an outsider with relatively little knowledge of the participants' backgrounds or rapport with them. Though such conversations can and do occur about curriculum artifacts other than visual texts, the indirect nature of talking about media may facilitate a more varied conversation. Students can play through a visual text, either by imagining themselves as a senator or speculating about challenging ideas like conspiracies. Great possibilities arise to connect with students' prejudices vis-à-vis the text and to communicate with each other about meaning when visual texts are offered as an aesthetic experience, rather than as a means of information retrieval. The conversation patterns suggest genuine listening and responding rather than a series of atomistic responses, echoing what Gadamer (1975/1989) called authentic conversations (p. 367-369). The dialogic quality of the focus groups was revealed when I tried to categorize data and continued to lose substantial amounts of meaning. Only after I began graphically mapping the conversations did the dialogic give-and-take quality of the focus groups become evident.

An important dimension of the data which was not recovered is the multiple acts of listening. What meanings were being constructed? How did they connect with previous meanings and allow for future ones? The dialogic nature of focus groups provided insights as to how people interpret what they hear, but only when they turn that interpretation into speech. The dialogic encounters evidenced in the hearing of participants in focus groups are unfortunately not part of the dataset. The problematic of listening is often ignored in curricular discussions of democratic education. There is a paucity of attention to listening with so much attention about the right to speak in the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition. Yet listening matters profoundly, particularly when we view visual text discourse in light of hermeneutics, or interpretation. Listening in a democratic vein "actively strives to understand the meaning of others in their terms" (Garrison, 1996). Social studies teaching, such as the focus group conversations that flowed from the visual texts, involves most participants listening most of the time. So while visual texts seem to promote a healthy exchange of ideas and differences, we need to know more about the dialogic encounters happening within the many points of listening.

Prejudices

Visual texts served as a mimetic reflection that connected with students in different ways. Yet, student prejudices also served as filters and additives to what was seen in the texts. Students saw their experiences reflected in the visual texts, but their viewing of it was occluded by fore-meanings. Student prejudices were revealed throughout the focus groups and became more visible when inter-group responses were compared. Students drew insights from the visual texts that indirectly spoke about and to their social and temporal locations, revealing a historical grounding

to their interpretations. But students did not articulate this dynamic. Their apparent lack of awareness reveals a methodological weakness of this particular study. I initially planned to further complicate the positioning of viewer and viewed by showing a video of each focus group to the other two. This choice would have certainly revealed some interesting comparisons among the groups, perhaps even student awareness of their prejudicial lenses in viewing. Despite this shortcoming, comparing student readings of visual texts suggests that more attention needs to be given to fore-meanings that students bring to all texts. Such awareness is actually a means of self-knowledge. As Gadamer (1975/1989) notes, "The prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being" (p. 278)

Prejudice, particularly in the context of social studies curriculum and elsewhere, has a strongly negative connotation. To be prejudiced is to be sinful and the remedy is to simply think differently. The guilt-laden way in which prejudices are dealt with in curriculum are unproductively alienating for students because they are meant to feel badly about that which they fundamentally are. A more useful way of addressing prejudices is to help students to discover their situated perspective, guide students in recovering their social identity through prejudices, and encourage them to think beyond, *but in light of*, their prejudices. The notion that one can escape all fore-meanings and live with equanimity about all ideas is unsound. When one thinks beyond a prejudice, or in Gadamer's terms, a new horizon, one is still situated in that new place such that "particular horizons, even if mobile, remain the presupposition of finite understanding" (Johnson, 2000, p. xviii).

Conclusion

Media is a vast, ubiquitous, and generally accessible repository of symbols that can engage students in critical meaning construction about and for democratic citizenship. Visual texts have an immediacy in the experience of youths that more favorably compares with other types of texts typically used in schools. I do not argue that visual texts can and should supplant other texts, for to do so would be counterproductive to the health of the democratic project. Rather, visual texts and media in many forms have the potential to extend, enrich, and deepen classroom discourse, and thus, contribute to a vibrant democratic society. Democracy is frequently cited as a rationale for education. Social studies has historically placed itself as the inheritor of this call, a wide and crucial aim. If social studies is to remain a significant curriculum area, it needs to attend more carefully to how pervasive media is interpreted by youth, how it is variously educative, and its capacity to awaken and nurture critical and interpretive abilities foundational to democratic life.

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Notes

[1] All proper names are pseudonyms.

[2] Special thanks to Angira Kapadia's efforts in all phases of this research.

[3] I completed focus group readings on a fourth non-fiction text related to a town meeting about race relations which I extracted from the current study and published as a separate piece: Gaudelli, W. (2005). Critically reading race on TV: Implications for leadership towards democratic education. *Journal of School Leadership,* 15 (3): 262-283.

[4] Despite my efforts to recruit a social studies teacher with whom I worked, I was directed to the A.P. English class since, as the principal indicated, "they had experience with viewing media critically" though this was not part of the selection criteria.

[5] Throughout the transcripts, I use the following symbols:

(word) to indicate something the speaker said but that was inaudible on the tape;

[phrase] an addition I made to the transcript to enhance its clarity;

…. Material that was edited out of the comment;

Italics to indicate my emphasis.

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