

To seminar, or not to seminar, that is the question

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I love "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes. I hate "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes. I cannot teach "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes. I must teach "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes.

I love "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes because of how he describes thereby producing the topographic contours of the seminar as a rich innervating complexity.

For Barthes, there are three spaces present in the seminar: the institutional, the transferential, and the textual. These three spaces are always already relational; necessarily so. Their dynamic relations are forever shifting. Their oscillating ratio supplement one another, they surprise one another. In relation to such inter-animating relations, these three spaces in the seminar do not judge, they do not prevail, one over the other, for to do so would be for one to dominate the other two at the expense of such a perfectly calibrated (if forever recalibrating) triumvirate.

By way of such relationality, Barthes figures the seminar as a utopian space, a space of utopia. Whether real or imaginary or probably both, "to the seminar" as a title and as an expression is, as he begins and concludes his essay, a locative (a location, and locatable, a place to go, a place to be, and a place to *do* ["Let's go to the seminar!"]); an encomium (a praising and a homage ["Join me in raising a glass to the seminar!"]); and a dedication ["I pledge my allegiance to the seminar!"]). And even if such a utopian impulse is out of date, as all utopias are, it is such outmodedness that enables this idea of the seminar to retain the promise of a possibility, carrying as it

does splinters of the past's potentialities into the contemporary like welcome gatecrashers. Such splinters are forever an incentive for us to hold out hope for the future; however heartbreaking is our present moment, marked as it is by living in the aftermath of 2016, and by the democratically sanctioned Proper Names of Post-Truth: Brexit and Trump.

To this utopian end, much like Ivan D. Illich and Paulo Freire before him, and so many since the emergence of Critical Pedagogy and, later, the Educational Turn in art and curatorial practice, Barthes calls for participation, for plurality, for co-production, for conviviality, for reciprocity, for communities of and as difference. He writes that "[a]s phalanstery, the seminar's work is the *production of differences*" (p. 334), as he celebrates the "unpredictable rhythm" of "listening up" as well as "speak[ing] up." (p. 336) Such incitements, echoing from the past, can be, must be, are being retrieved, trans-ferred, brought forth; I see this every day, and I am glad. Barthes makes it possible to speak on behalf of the capacities and the potentialities of the institution – the university, the art school, an organization like BAK – *as an instituting*; and that the seminar is a way in which they institute; to seminar is the means by which they institute. It is the means by which we all can, must, do institute.

I hate "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes because this very utopianism is unrealistic and unrealizable; although aren't they all, and isn't this the point. Its anachronism is hopelessly out of date, and actually it's utopia's *promise* of a possibility, its gift of hope itself that is so devastating; as Nietzsche put it in *Human, All Too Human*, hope is the worst of all evils because it prolongs our torment. It's the hope that kills you!

And hope does spring eternal in the human breast. But we are exhausted from the whirling exertions of the hoping and the trying and the sharing and the DIT (Do It Together) communitarian utopianism that institutes and bears

this Educational Turn; that is now everywhere present but dead. It is a new hegemony and we have exhausted its possibility. Indeed, we are the exhausted (*L'epuisé*) who exhaust all of the possible; we can no longer possibilite. ¹

I hate "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes, finally, because it's so... French. So 70s. So a product of a particular milieu, and also the context for the intellectual formation of the awesome thinkers that taught me, the thinkers that thunk me, of a milieu so full of hope and possibility and risk and daring and ambition, so unlike our own. (At least, that's how in hindsight it appears to be, and how, with foresight, tomorrow seems to be coming into view otherwise.)

I cannot teach "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes because I can't afford to be so... ambitious. So daring. So risky. So... laissez-faire.

Barthes writes that the second space of the seminar, the transferential, is established classically between the director of the seminar (let us say the teacher, me) and the seminar's members (let us say the students, them) but that the director's role is not to be the font of absolute knowledge, a law-giver, a sacred consecrated subject who knows.

Even in its classic incarnation, he writes, the director's role is "not to say what I know, [but to] set forth what I am doing," and what I am doing is "to clear the stage on which horizontal transferences will be established." (p. 333) This is to say, of significance for Barthes, for

the seminar, in seminar-ing, is that in the seminar-ing it "is not the relation of the members to the director but the relation of the members to each other." (p. 333). What's pronounced is that the "teaching relation" is "not the relation of teacher to taught, but the relation of those taught to each other." (p. 333)

Which is all well and good in theory, in the 1970s, for Barthes, in environments in which teaching does not need to be measurable, in which there is no "savoir dirigé," but in practice?

As a Programme Leader, as a module leader, as a leader of seminars, I have a responsibility to my students. Do I lead or administer or lead by administering? Or by teaching? I might not be the font of absolute knowledge, and certainly not a sacred subject who knows, but I do know a bunch of stuff, so it's reasonable to infer that I am, at least, the subject *supposed* to know!

For Barthes, not so. At least, I shouldn't be. He goes so far as to write, in the essay's section entitled "Disappointment" (p. 334), that if the seminar has some relation to gratification, it will also be a space of disappointment. This disappointment is, he writes, of two orders: the "not" (explained) and the "not even." The student may observe, he writes, that I have not explained to them *why* this, or *how* that, etc. This is acceptable, inconsequential even. What is to them unacceptable is that I might have "not even" told them this or that, explained it to them, shown them, gratified them.

Today, though, in this current climate, to "not even" must be an offence, surely? I guess that my students... it is only a guess... perhaps I should ask them... would be disappointed that I had not explained to them why and how; that they had not been taught, educated, schooled,

1 I hate "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes because he writes of the seminar as transferential yet states that "this word is given with no psychoanalytic rigor." (p. 332). Throughout the essay, though, he writes that the seminar is a delirium (p. 332); involves "relations of knowledge and the body" (p. 338); that the body is in reserve in any and all conversations (p. 335) and is "always the future of what is said 'entre nous'" (p. 335); that the seminar has a "subtle topography of corporeal relations" (p. 332), that our relations to it are amorous (p. 332); and that it has some relation of gratification (p. 334). And here, the essay's translator is careful to leave in the French word that Barthes uses to describe the nature of that relation of gratification: it is *jouissance*.

Tell me the seminar as transferential is without psychoanalytic rigor Barthes is familiar with Freud and Lacan – the latter is dealing with transference already in the 1950s and 1960s – and all these claims, the very act of making the statement itself, gives the lie to it.

Maybe I'm taking him too seriously, too literally. But still, and anyway, what's wrong with claiming that the

seminar, that to seminar, as transferential might be given with a psychoanalytic rigor?

Right now, there are two simple comebacks to this question. One relates to etymology, the other to economy.

The first is that the seminar is from Middle English *seminary*, from Latin, *seminarium*, "seed plot", neuter of *seminarius* of seed, from *semen* "seed" stipulating that the seminar, and perhaps even more so to seminar, is not just always already psychoanalytic but also always and already sexological – for good or ill (and mostly for ill, I would have thought, unless one feels confident that Barthes enables us to untether seminar-ing from these etymological moorings).

The second is that Barthes writes of and on behalf of desire, but I don't know if, today, it's possible to speak of desire outside of capitalism (which would, then, include the university, the art school, the cultural institution, the exhibition, art, and the nature and use and value of seminar-ing, the currency in and of the seminar, as nothing other than capitalism's playthings).

skilled; been illuminated and enlightened; that they had no new demonstrable knowledge, no new tools in their toolbox, nothing new to work with; that they had not been edified. Improved. Bettered.

Not least because they are paying, and paying a considerable amount; and they are not asking to be spoon-fed, to be mothered or fathered; but is it unreasonable for them to want to know how what it is that they are paying for accumulates, amounts to more? That it is more than they had beforehand? That they know more now, that they are more now? Because of it?

Why, I guess they might ask... perhaps I should ask them... should we have to do all the work? How has it come to be that we are paying for the privilege of doing all the work? We could have done all the work ourselves, on our own, with others, outside of the institution, in an anti-institution, an anti-university, an open art school, a pub, an open online course with MIT or Harvard, in a seminar of our own conceiving?

Perhaps I'm doing my students a disservice, and perhaps they're not thinking like this... perhaps I should ask them. Perhaps I'm taking what Barthes writes too literally... but... surely... surely... when he writes of the disappointment of the "*not even*," is he really suggesting... because this is what I hear him suggesting... that I might *actively withhold* from them? That I *should* actively withhold from them – that I should not explain to them why and how, not show and tell, not gratify them, at least to the best of my ability and to their (relative) satisfaction? Why should I not do any and all of this?

So that they can learn *for* themselves, learn *together*? Isn't doing this what we've come to call "facilitating independent learning," now another pedagogical cliché, vacuous hippy shit spun into the empty rhetoric of pedagogy in the neo-liberal university going forward? (cf. "the student experience", "promoting excellence in higher education", and "enhancing teaching quality".)

And surely, in the end, isn't actively denying my students in these ways no more than me preserving and proclaiming my role as director

"draped in the interminable discourse of absolute knowledge" (p. 333) (albeit worn in different ways), a law-giver (albeit of different laws), as "a sacred (consecrated) subject" (p. 333) who knows or is supposed-to-know (albeit one who professes to care more about them than my own authority)?

If so, I'm still The Holder of the Secret, a withholder of knowledge, who holds this withholding over them, so that they want it more, so that they want what I have more, so that they want me more. Why would I want to be that kind of director? I've known pedagogues who teach like that; I hate pedagogues who teach like that – the archetypal Pedagogue as Keeper of Knowledge, as Wielder of the Secret of Knowledge, of Knowledge as Secret, the Seducer, whose sword is forged of Valyrian steel and is named Truth.

And anyway, and of course, this is Barthes' point, especially in relation to transference: it's not meant to be about me.

This is why I must teach, or better, assign "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes: because it's not about me. Barthes' essay makes me realize this, it forces me to see this, to accept this, to know that this is true. And right. Of course, how I conceive of or arrange or orchestrate a seminar, how I create the conditions to seminar, how I behave and comport myself, surely has a profound effect on how we seminar. For I am, despite what Barthes may say and want, in a position of authority, and, it's actually *from* here, as Joe L. Kincheloe writes after Freire, that I "demonstrate that authority in [my] actions in support of students" which is how, Kincheloe goes on, they "gain their freedom... the ability to become self-directed human beings capable of producing their own knowledge." (p. 17)

Nonetheless, it is *the process of*, the *act of* seminar-ing with Barthes, with Henk, Margo, René, and Tiong, the students on the MA Fine Art at Utrecht Graduate School of Visual Art and Design (MaHKU), the BAK staff, and oth-

ers in attendance, including the two students from the MA Fine Arts at the Sandberg Institute Amsterdam that equips me to ponder thus, that gets me thinking about teaching, about my teaching, my role, my responsibilities, and the questions I need to pose: who's here? Who gets to be in the seminar? Who's invited, and under what conditions? Why are *they* here, and why are they *here*? What do they bring? What do they want? From where do I speak? And, if the seminar is transference, if to seminar is transference, what is being transferred, how, why, and to what end? ²

Ultimately, I love "To the Seminar" by Roland Barthes then because, in the end and from the beginning, for him seminar is concerned with "an order of ramifications." [p. 338]. That is to say, to seminar is not to make meaning; it is to expose hermeneutics as a method, to tarnish interpretation as a mode, to dispute meaning-making per se. This is actually its most profound observation. It is what has made it possible for us to speak today, so frequently (although perhaps too easily) on behalf of what art *does* rather than what it *means*.

2 For Lacan, the analysand viewing the analyst as the "subject supposed to know", while a fantasy, is the fantasy that structures all pedagogical relations. For him, transference does not refer to, is not driven by, what is transferred is not "any mysterious property of affect" (p.225) (the unconscious redirection of feeling from one person or idea or object to another) but rather is a structure of an inter-subjective relationship. Of such relations, he affirms that while "it is natural to interpret the transference", by way of these interpretations the goal is not to ameliorate the analysand's relations to reality but to maintain analytic dialogue.

This is crucial; this is the key to transference, to pedagogy, and thus to seminar: such relations are not for the purpose of interpretation but to *maintain* the dialogue. This is evident from the etymology of the term transference (which is synonymous with translation and metaphor), with its roots in the Latin, the past participle of *traderre*, which means to bear or to carry. While evoking motion and direction, transference is not simply to bear or to carry something (a burden) or someone (a child). Rather it is to bear or to carry someone or something *across*, from here to there. That something or someone comes to be re-located, comes to end up somewhere new, somewhere else. It is a crossing. But, I would venture further, what's far-reaching is not so much the getting *there* as the *getting* there. To seminar is this across; this across is to seminar. This noun (seminar) is always already a verb (to seminar) - to convene or meet, to discuss or congress, to teach or to learn or to study or to workshop. This is how, in the seminar and by way of seminar-ing, knowledge is created: by maintaining. And how it is transmitted, for to seminar is both to create and to transmit knowledge.

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