Dropping Bread Crumbs in the Intertextual Forest

Critical Literacy in a Postmodern Age

or: We Should Have Brought a Compass

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So one urgent task is to try to understand what skills, aptitudes, knowledges, dispositions, concerned with representation and communication young people will need in the world of the next two decades or three, in order to be able to live productive, fulfilling lives. What will the subject English need to become in order to function as an essential part of the education of young people? what does it need to focus on? What questions, issues, concerns, knowledges need to be central?

Gunther Kress

O NE WAY TO ADDRESS THE LARGE QUESTIONS KRESS POSES IS TO TURN TO cultural theorist bell hooks who insists that we "can't overvalue the importance of literacy to a culture that is deeply visual. . . . Rather than seeing literacy and the visual (and our pleasure of the visual) as oppositional to one another, we have to see them as compatible with one another" (*Cultural Criticism*). Certainly, Kress would agree, and while we will not concentrate on Kress's discussion alone, it is a good one to open with because it does center our concern for reconfigurations of literacy on the overwhelming role the media and corresponding changing technologies play in the ways we must talk about literacy education.

The image is at issue in so very much of this discussion whether it is film, print, television and video images, or web pages, print layouts, charts and other graphic illustrations of information, or the play of font and text as we see in the work of Myka Vielstimmig (a.k.a., Kathleen Yancey and Michael Spooner). To get very briefly at some of the intertextual demands of a literacy that insists on the role of the visual (and the electronic) as well as the verbal, we begin with three images.
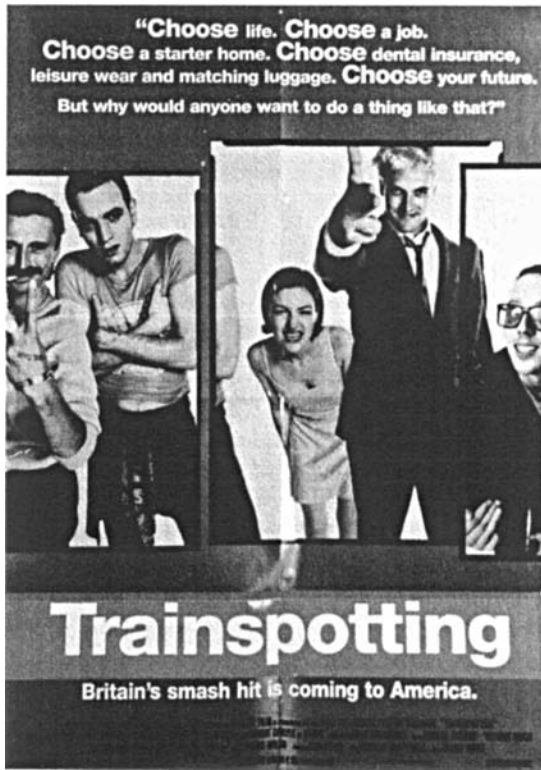
Figure 1

"Choose life. Choose a job.
Choose a starter home. Choose dental insurance,
leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose your future.
But why would anyone want to do a thing like that?"

Trainspotting

Britain's smash hit is coming to America.

Figure 2

Figure 3

The first, a publicity poster for the British film *Trainspotting,* might easily be compared to or at least put in juxtaposition with the second, portion of a popular Calvin Klein print ad for *Be* cologne. The two are so easily juxtaposed not because the two products are alike. Instead, it is the similarity of the images themselves that make possible a comparison—even a new conversation entirely—in the ways they call upon each other, perhaps even comment upon one another (figures 1 and 2). To make that comparison even sharper, we could take away the language of the poster, as we do in the third illustration, and view the Trainspotting group horizontally rather than vertically, thus much more literally calling forth the way the two images seem to be one, about one thing, sprung from the same lens and attitude and conversation (figure 3).

And, what is that conversation? Well, it is partially about style—in this case, something called "streetwise" or "heroin chic"—about a youth culture determined to be on its own and separate from the overculture of institutional employment and the drone of everyday responsibility. "Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a starter home. Choose dental insurance, leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose your future. But why would anyone want to do a thing like that?" the poster shouts. It's an accusing or taunting challenge that calls for choosing anything but a mundane existence in which dental insurance is as important as matching luggage and life itself. And even without the *Trainspotting* poster next to it, the Calvin Klein ad says much the same: "Just Be." And, yet, as contemporary as this image looks, the call to "Just Be" echoes earlier youth rebellions: "Tune in. Turn on. Drop out." "Do your own thing."

But there is more: The heroin chic style in the Calvin ad next to the poster of actors playing burnt-out but likable heroin addicts in a funny/tragic film calls

up something of the tenor of both images. The tough girl looks of the ad match the tough girl sneering at the camera for *Trainspotting*. The *Trainspotting* actor wearing a peace dove on his shirt calls up Sixties youth. And the androgynous young woman crouched in the foreground of the Calvin ad wears the tattoo of an ex-marine or an auto mechanic addicted to those old girlie calendars. The mocking, "Choose life." of the poster accuses conformists of being sedate, over-protective, conservative, and perhaps fundamentalist in issues of sexual or bio-logical freedom. The young women in both images look anything but conservative or safe. They are images about transgression, but as bell hooks reminds us to ask, "Transgression in the service of what?" That question isn't at all easy to answer given the fact that one image is an ad for a not-exactly-cheap cologne, and the other is Miramax's publicity for a hit movie.

The many ways these two images call upon each other and the multiple texts we do not see that readers draw upon to read either or both images is a part of the complex of literacy. And, of course, we have put these images side-by-side. They weren't placed in juxtaposition for us. It would be by sheer coincidence to see the two together in a public setting. Yet, in looking at a poster like the one for *Trainspotting*, a critical literacy demands that readers recall where else they have seen such an image, what it is like, what it reminds them of, in what contexts it occurs, and more. It is something like what Sarah Sloane suggests with the wonderful concept of medial hauntings, but not quite.

New communication technologies, it is frequently argued, have the poten-tial to give us access to more and different kinds of texts. They thus by their nature, we could argue, generate a kind of intertextuality: the term intertextu-ality itself has a rich history beginning in literary theory, specifically in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which he defines as "the necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances." For Bahktin, as Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis note,

> All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, conscious and unconscious quota-tions, conflations and inversions of other texts. In the broadest sense, intertex-tual dialogism refers to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, and which reach the text not only through the recognizable influences but through a subtle process of dis-semination. (Stam 204)

Such a notion of intertextuality is perhaps even more significant in a post-modern age where cultural artifacts are often steeped in ambiguity and nuance. The Calvin ad, for instance, is deliberately vague, combining some facial and body cues which imply "natural" personal interaction or narrative with the flat white background and staged poses of traditional high fashion ads. Such contradictions invite interpretation, demand that the spectator par-ticipate in the process of making meaning. Again, the idea of intertextuality

suggests that the references and resources for such a process are more representational than real—part of a cultural matrix.

So, then, to go back to those large questions Kress poses—what "questions, issues, concerns, knowledges need to be central" to a literacy education that can prepare students for the next few decades—our first response would be one suggested by the reading we have just begun on the images reprinted here. Literacy itself makes intertextual demands of the reader. What's more, changing technologies make those intertextual demands increasingly more multiple, widespread, and intricate than they were even thirty years ago. Let's take, for example, Dennis Baron's comments on the implications of web technologies. As Baron notes, "in a kind of backward wave, the new technology begins to affect older technologies, as well."

With respect to our illustrations, then, the matrix of technologies inform-ing our reading of both the poster and the ad includes television commercials for *Be* cologne, music videos sporting heroin-chic styles, a giant Times Square billboard featuring Kate Moss, Richard Avedon's preference for shooting ads and posters like these with a large format camera, several Calvin Klein websites including one calling for a boycott of the heroin chic look,[1] *Trainspotting* websites, style programming shown on videos in clothing sections of major department stores, the film *Trainspotting*, news broadcasts of the Dole campaign lambasting that film for making heroin addiction "attractive," and more.[2] How all of these communication technologies interact, affect the reading of and change each other is what may be at issue here. Any attempt to pin down all of the possible connections and effects would certainly be pointless. We won't even try.

Instead of drawing an intertextual treasure map we offer more questions, more concerns, again in response to Kress's demand for a new way of thinking through the issues of literacy education. One concern that Dennis Baron raises, for example, is that of reliability: "Not only must the new technology be accessible and useful," Baron writes, "it must demonstrate its trustworthiness as well. So procedures for authentication and reliability must be developed before the new technology becomes fully accepted." That is true, of course, but it is even more complicated than just developing "procedures for authentication and reliability." Such procedures are already in place in the ways we read the word and the world. They simply aren't quite as reliable as we would like them to be. In fact, we might argue that searching for ways of assuring reliability of information could lead to just another dead end. It won't get us anywhere because the concepts of authenticity and reliability are much too slippery.

IT LOOKED REAL ENOUGH TO ME

On December 14, 1996, NBC broadcast the episode "We Shall Overcome" of a program that, as of this writing, appears to have been canceled after one short season. "Dark Skies", we are told by co-creator Bryce Zabel whose words

appear on the official NBC website for this program, "isn't just a TV series; it's a blend of fact, informed speculation and dramatic license. The series premise is simply this: our future's happening in our past." Executive producer James D. Parriott makes the show's premise even clearer: "This is being presented as alternative history. Everyone has their favorite conspiracies, but we will challenge and expand on those by building a framework that adds consistency to the alien-awareness theories."[3]

Yes. Everyone has their favorite conspiracies, but let's take a look at this particular conspiracy. This episode written by Zabel and Brent V. Friedman opens with black and white film footage of Martin Luther King, Jr. giving his "I Have a Dream" speech then cuts to news clips (still in black and white) of civil rights organizers clashing with police. These, too, are familiar images: children being thrown up against buildings by the force of high pressure fire hoses; men and women beaten and dragged through the streets; angry white protesters threatening black demonstrators. What's more, this is actual news film footage; it is not a re-enactment of events. Eventually, we see a newspaper headline: three civil rights workers in Mississippi are missing. There is no mention of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman (the three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi during this period), but this plot is a clear reference to that event.

As the episode continues, we discover that the missing civil rights workers were indeed murdered and that, contrary to popular opinion, it was not uncontrolled racism that led to these deaths but space aliens who "manipulated racial strife" to plant their pods in a local church. For its plot, the episode draws upon not only the murder of these three young men but also at least an implied reference to King's murder and the torching of a Black church, suggesting perhaps that all of it—King's assassination, the deaths of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, the brutality of police against pacifist demonstrators, recent church burnings, and more—can be blamed on something over which we have no control: space aliens.

These documentary moments inserted into the fiction serve to validate the fiction. In the case of "Dark Skies," we might argue, these moments insult the historical moment by suggesting that none of us has control over racial clashes. We are the dupes of alien forms. And, what's more, in a political climate of paranoia over undocumented workers coming into the US from Mexico, the very term alien takes on meaning well beyond ET.

Certainly, "Dark Skies" is just one of many venues taking advantage of new technologies that allow Tom Hanks as Forest Gump to stand next to Nixon or (to use Baron's example) Marilyn Monroe to flash Lincoln. In that sense, the program is a technological delight through which viewers slip in and out of history by way of old news footage intertwined with new stories. In this context, however, it is well to remember what the creators of this show claim: "This is being presented as alternative history."

The literacy education, then, that becomes necessary for reading a program like this is one not only cognizant of the technological advances making such

"digital frauds" possible, but a critical literacy that questions the reasons for and effects of digital prestidigitation. The medial hauntings or intertexts that come into play here range all the way from original broadcasts of these events in the civil rights movement to any number of documentaries that replay these same moments to more recent television re-enactments of these moments (as in the series "I'll Fly Away"), to stories of recent church burnings, to the passage of California Proposition 209 which attempts to strip away affirmative action legislation won through civil rights struggles, and more. What we are suggesting is that the literacy it takes to "read" a program like "Dark Skies" is no simple skill.

We might pause here to focus on documentary partially because it is through documentary insertions that a program like "Dark Skies" attempts to achieve credibility, and because documentary is one of those genres viewers seem to think must stand up to tests of reliability and authenticity. Besides, the documentary appears, at least to many of our students, like a form that ought to be straightforward, factual, and beyond interpretation, and yet the documentary is hardly that. Instead, it takes on a number of forms and functions, from Ken Burn's attempt to re-enact history in "Civil War" to Michael Moore's funny and biting satire on the auto industry in *Roger and Me.*

Film scholar Michael Renov reminds us that documentary has been called "the film of fact,' 'nonfiction,' the realm of information and exposition rather than diegetic employment or imagination—in short, at a remove from the creative core of the cinematic art" (13). It is typical for viewers to think of documentary as a form that "reveals truth." The common definition reasserts that understanding of documentary:

> 1. Consisting of, concerning, or based upon documents. 2. Presenting facts objectively without editorializing or inserting fictional matter, as in a book, newspaper account, or film. n. A television or motion-picture presentation of factual, political, social, or historical events or circumstances, often consisting of actual news films accompanied by narration. (American Heritage Dictionary)

The popular definition clearly links documentary to unbiased reporting, but the history of this genre places it far from unbiased reporting. As early as 1932, John Grierson distinguished documentary from what he considered a "lower order" of film (travelogues, newsreels, etc.). For Grierson, already in 1932, documentary was the place where nonfiction film entered the world of art. In designating documentary as art, Grierson acknowledged its status as a carefully constructed form rather than a window to the real.

Renov, of course, rejects the oversimplified notion of documentary as "fact" and argues that film documentary has at least four specific textual functions, any combination of which might be present in a given text. If you view these separate functions as overlapping layers of a film rather than rigid, prescriptive elements, they can give us some insight into the complexity of the documentary text:

1) to record, reveal, or preserve (realism)
2) to persuade or promote (argument)
3) to analyze or interrogate (discover meaning)
4) to express (Renov describes this function as "aesthetic," the emotive function)

The last three of these functions already take us beyond that dictionary def-
inition. The impulse to record, reveal, or preserve—as crucial as it may be for
the documentary moment—is clearly only the initial impulse of much docu-
mentary film. By contrast expression is, perhaps, the least apparent function of
the documentary, and it is probably the function students are least likely to
identify as documentary. Indeed, they might argue that a film with a strong
emotive function is not a documentary at all. That split—between the real and
the expressive—is of course a false one. Photographs and journals do not cap-
ture the real any better than satire and parody. And, all of these films are con-
structions. All are parts of larger conversations.

WHAT'S SO REAL ABOUT FICTION?

At this point, it will be useful to turn to another example of the sort of text
that makes tests of reliability and authenticity seem maddeningly difficult to
design. The film *Dead Man Walking* was suggested by the 1993 memoir which
chronicles Sister Helen Prejean's ministry to death row inmates in Angola
prison, an experience which solidified her opposition to the death penalty and
led her to become an activist against it. Tim Robbins wrote and directed the
feature film of the same name; Sean Penn plays the role of death row inmate
Matthew Poncelet, and Susan Sarandon won the Academy Award in 1996 for
her performance as Sister Prejean. PBS's *Frontline* has done a story on Sister
Prejean crediting her with bringing the issue of the death penalty back into
public debate in the US. As well, PBS maintains an official *Dead Man Walking*
web page through which readers can access interviews with Sister Prejean, with
Tim Robbins, and with Susan Sarandon. The page is also linked to other dis-
cussions of the death penalty.[4] Already, the medial hauntings are many.

The death penalty is one of those issues which is certainly likely to come up
in the English classroom but which teachers often dread putting before their
students precisely because it evokes such strong emotional responses. Like the
issue of abortion in the U.S., discussions of the death penalty tend to elicit
polarized responses rooted in moral or religious beliefs that appear to be
beyond reconciliation. One step in the process of teaching students to read the
terrain of a discussion like this one is to help them to see that debates like the
one on the death penalty exist, as John Trimbur has suggested, within a contin-
uum of discourse.[5] And one way to help students see a film representation not
as an isolated event but as one text in a larger conversation is to introduce
some of those other texts into the classroom. In the case of *Dead Man Walking*,
this might mean, for instance, discussing parts of Prejean's book, reading
accounts by death row inmates and victims' rights advocates, calling up the

PBS website and following the links it provides, and watching a segment from the *Frontline* episode. The rationale behind such an approach is not to present one text as primary and the others as "support," but to consider how each helps create a context for understanding the others. All of this is to remind us of what we already know: students are much less likely to blindly accept or reject certain texts as "real" if we don't set them up to do so by neglecting to provide them with resources to help situate the discussion. Equally, the point of this approach is not to engage in a search for "truth" or reliability as a sequence of events that can be observed and recorded but instead to pursue a fuller, much more complicated reality.

Certainly Tim Robbins's film is a powerful portrayal of that kind of complicated reality. Although sometimes credited for its evenhandedness in dealing with the death penalty, it is a film that does take a position, one that is in line with Sister Prejean's opposition to capital punishment. What we believe is unusual about this film, however, is that it humanizes the death row inmate and in so doing makes real the consequences of the death penalty at the same time that it acknowledges the equally real pain and suffering of the victims and their families. It is a film which very directly and intentionally plays to our emotions not to cloud our understanding of the issue at hand but to make our understanding more acute. From this perspective *Dead Man Walking* is clearly docu-drama rather than documentary in that it privileges the expressive rather than the recording function. One way Robbins makes this clear is through the disclaimer from the film credits:

> This film is inspired by the events in the life of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J. which she describes in her book, *Dead Man Walking*. As a dramatization, composite and fictional characters and incidents have been used. Therefore, no inference should be drawn from the events and characters presented here about any of the real persons connected with the life of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

What this disclaimer means is that the character of Matthew Poncelet does not exist in real life because he is a composite and thereby a fiction. As well, the families we see portrayed are composites. And yet, all of the incidents portrayed, including much of the dialogue, come directly from Sister Helen's experience as she describes it in her book.

Of course for some viewers this can pose a problem. If Matthew Poncelet is neither Pat Sonnier nor Robert Lee Willie (the two death row inmates of the memoir), and if the Percys don't exist, then why watch this movie at all? If it isn't real, then what good is it? What the film provides, then, is not the documentation of particular murders but a fuller context which enables the audience to see all of the characters involved as human beings—including so-called "animals" like Matthew Poncelet. The kinds of literacy skills students must call on to understand this continuum of discourse are rarely taught but they certainly include an understanding of intertextuality, a validation of many kinds of texts, and an ability to sort through positions on a topic like the death

penalty—positions that are often contradictory or that seem to form and reform themselves as the discussion progresses.

ESSAYIST LITERACY AND THE SEARCH FOR A CENTER

All this talk of multiple texts that take all forms each posing its own problems of reliability must make Doug Hesse's concern for the recovery of essayistic literacy seem an old fashioned one, at best. And, yet, it seems to us that Hesse's real concern is at the heart of critical literacy in a postmodern age. When we speak of the importance of intertextuality for a discussion of literacy and technology, we are speaking not of easy access to an ever-growing number of texts, but, like Hesse, of a process of reading. This process is one of discerning the relationship(s) of texts to one another and to their multiple contexts. It demands that readers pose questions about origin, voice, and, ultimately, reception: that they ask not only where texts are generated from, but also more precisely who is speaking, and for and to whom. Thus, in a discussion of a film like *Dead Man Walking* a consideration of our own attitudes about murder or religion or the death penalty are not peripheral but central to a consideration of the text's "meaning." To paraphrase Hesse, for us an important part of the process of reading involves readers constantly figuring themselves as the makers of knowledge.

Although the notion of process may be in danger of becoming a critical and pedagogical cliché, we emphasize literacy as a process for two reasons: first and most obviously, if literacy is henceforth linked to technology, it is by definition changing and changeable as technologies evolve. More importantly for our discussion, however, if literacy is intimately connected to intertextuality as an awareness and understanding of the relationships among texts and between texts and readers, then literacy is never fixed or finished. Instead, it entails an ongoing re-evaluation and reformulation of the cultural and textual terrain as that terrain itself, including the positions of readers, shifts.

Defining critical literacy as a process of reading in which readers themselves are central to meaning-making leads to the question of whether that role and process shift with different kinds of texts. Although on the one hand we might want to argue that, in a postmodern technological age, the basic parameters of this process hold for all texts, it has nonetheless been a familiar critical claim that postmodern texts make different demands and construct diverse roles for readers. The multi-vocal, multi-font, multi-directional character of the Vielstimmig essay, for instance, suggests a kind of freedom enabling both writer(s) and reader(s) to dive straight into the play of text and idea. Myka Vielstimmig is, of course, not simply a combined person/a or collaboration but a position being staked out in academic rhetoric. It is a position that openly demands that its readers make connections not being made for them, that they treat this text as hypertext, and that they know how to read hypertext.

What remains problematic from our point of view is the extent to which postmodern play threatens to abandon responsibility for the way these ideas

will be linked. Hesse's warning that "a landscape leavened by the ultimate equality of all texts offers no fulcrum for advocacy or change" is one we take very seriously because of the way certain kinds of texts (like the listserv Hesse writes of) can appear to be all-inclusive and interactive and yet lead to no action at all—they simply take on more voices, more length. Although the links we find in web pages are intriguing to follow, but they are often arbitrary links. They don't necessarily make an argument, present a position, or offer options, and (though this may be the information superhighway) they also will not lead us to all information available on a given subject, as some novice Internet explorers believe.[6]

Most likely, Vielstimmig would say that responsibility remains with the reader—it is the reader and not the writer who will make meaning here—yet we are not at all sanguine about the writer's hidden role in all of this. Critical literacy must call equal attention to the production as well as the reception of texts. In her discussion of using film and video texts in the classroom, bell hooks reminds us that viewers often do not want to believe that these images and their stories are constructions. They want to preserve, for movies at least, the sense of magic. And, it is when the technology is very good at hiding that process of selection and construction that the process is mystified—the ideas being presented seem real or natural. They don't seem to come from anyone at all but rather to exist out there, ready to be represented.

We aren't arguing here for a return to the notion of a unified subject who constructs a single meaning for a text. We do know and accept that the center is not always there or that there are many centers possible. What we are concerned about is the potential for abandoning the responsibility writers, filmmakers, and other cultural producers must take for the ideas they put before us. Representation is never innocent. It has real effects and repercussions. This is a very serious business in a world in which racism, hatred, poverty, violence, hunger, and fear play no small part in the ways we live our lives and the decisions we make about our communities. What that means is that the burden is equally on the producer as it is the reader of these texts to understand the sometimes contradictory roles they can play in a larger system.

Kress asks us to identify, "What skills, aptitudes, knowledges, dispositions, concerned with representation and communication young people will need in the world of the next two decades or three, in order to be able to live productive, fulfilling lives." We would answer simply that the one skill most necessary for a critical literacy in a postmodern age is the ability to take on that responsibility for ideas and for action both as a producer of texts and as a reader. We fail if we only either encourage our students to pursue or warn them away from the fragmented, ever-growing information on the Internet. Or, if we teach them to deconstruct advertising images but do not give them the critical skills to produce something in their place, we fail just the same.

We would argue that real change can only happen when we combine an awareness of the world around us and how that world functions with a language

by which to communicate that awareness. That language can take many forms, but the form it does take we believe must be taken consciously. Critical literacy in a postmodern age demands that we acknowledge our role in and take responsibility for language and form and image and communication systems in a way that not only critiques but envisions new possibilities. It does, at times, seem like we are marking our way by dropping bread crumbs in an intertextual forest, only to look behind us and see that they have disappeared. We wish we could have brought a compass. There just isn't one that points in all of those directions at once.

NOTES

1. We found a number of sites simply by entering the words Calvin Klein or *Trainspotting* in the search engine. The heroin chic boycott site currently resides at http://www.emory.edu/NFIA/NEW/HEROINCHIC/ck.html. Of course, websites are ephemeral things. This one may or may not exist by the time you read this.

2. We might add here that our own reading of *Trainspotting* does not agree with the Dole campaign's. It isn't the film—certainly not the events or plot of the film— that might make heroin addiction seem attractive. What makes heroin addiction (or at least the characters in this film) attractive is the way they mirror hip, streetwise styles and thus epitomize a certain contemporary youth culture look.

3. With the cancellation of "Dark Skies," the Website seems to have disappeared as well, but during the 1996 season, the site was open and accessed through NBC's official site.

4. As of this writing, the *Dead Man Walking* page can be found at http://www2.pbs. org/wgbh/pages/frontline/angel/walking/index.html It includes information from the *Frontline* episode "Angel on Death Row" as well as links to other kinds of information that might be related to the issue of the death penalty or the people involved in the making of the Robbins film.

5. We don't know that John would expect or even want to be credited here, but his comments came in a conversation we had with him while we were working on a very early version of our discussion of *Dead Man Walking*, and they helped us clarify what we could see as potential problems with bringing documentary and docu-drama into a classroom discussion of a serious issue like the death penalty.

6. America Online's current television spot on how the Web can help you do your child's homework late on Sunday night is a good representation of what many new users think the Internet can do. There is always, claims the commercial, a teacher online waiting to help.