CARLA HERRERA-PRATS -

PREP MATERIALS

DUDE...I'M SO WASTED
Eva Díaz

In Sean Penn's portrayal of mellow, witless, very near atavistic San Diego stoner Jeff Spicoli in the 1982 film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, a throwaway shot of Spicoli in a U.S. history class exam shows him penciling the bubbles of a standardized test with the outline of a surfboard.

Hold up, was that actually in the movie? Did that really *happen*?

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Frittered away at least the last half-hour posing increasingly esoteric Google searches, trying badly, unsuccessfully, to source a supporting image or any sort of passing reference substantiating my clear and cogent memory of this scene. Rabid fandom surrounds the movie, I (very) recently learned— even cursory research indicates that a full-blown FTARH cult can be identified, particularly among men of a certain age with regard to a notorious red bikini scene. Virulence of the FTARH following suggests that if not one aficionado has so much as mentioned this shot in the fertile nooks of the internet containing, for example 1) several competing, completely transcribed scripts of the film, 2) detailed frame-by-frame, post facto storyboards, and 3) exhaustive plot, dialogue, and character analyses; that perhaps this ostensibly indelible incident in FTARH *did not actually happen*, or at least not in FTARH. I must rent the movie and immediately subject it to agitated, remote-controlled fast forward scrutiny.[1]

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The Spicoli scene was to be the hook for this essay on Carla Herrera-Prats's work on standardized testing because, *if* it existed (even if only as a whimsy of my imagination), it represents the superlative fuck you to the litany of monotonous high school (and college) exams whereby we all crammed (or not), then crouched over Scantron sheets clutching sweaty number 2 pencils and performed our one/two/three hour monkey work of plugging in numbered ovals. STOP working and put down your pencils. You know the drill.

I was too young for FTARH to be a contemporaneous reference (and hell, it still hasn't been established whether the scene cum mirage was even *in* the movie), but I never was as intrepid as Spicoli in making pattern of my Scantron. He is the doofy *id* of public education I was too busy repressing in order to academically *succeed*, my only ticket out of that rotten euphemism, the Inland Empire—San Bernardino, California—"the junkyard of dreams," in urbanist Mike Davis's wonderfully snarky estimation. My Scantron technique was far more instrumental: if, for example, I had squandered test time at the proctor's one minute warning, I would hastily fill the blank bed of remaining bubbles by consistently marking a single letter in one vertical column. That way, I reasoned, it was statistically possible to get a right answer or two out of the mess.

Marxists may call that petty bourgeois striving. Spicoli, in contrast, represents working class/slacker disinvestment in what Louis Althusser once termed the repressive control apparatus of education; Spicoli spurns the aspirational swill that explains successes and failures as the result of individual merit, when in reality the structural effects of standardized testing have historically and consistently reproduced and legit-imated the existing class constitution of society. Paul Willis's classic 1977 sociological study *Learning to Labor* details how working class mobility is discouraged externally and policed internally by associating educational success with conformity to dominant cultural values. Though working class or low-paying service jobs are, in effect, as repetitive and automated as

the labor required to complete a standardized test, society's capitalist imperative privileges these jobs' financial remuner-ation above the intellectual labor of school. Public education allows for a brief and fiery burst of youthful rebellion before the hammer comes down and the real soul sucking tedium of wage earning kicks in. The "fuck you" of the surfboard silhouette encapsulates working class leveled ambition in all its pitiless irony. The scoring machine can't read the figure or comprehend the intended middle finger, but at least one audience will, the teacher as agent of the educational system. But low-grade pestering of in the field representatives of the system hardly gets you far, and perhaps that's the point of valorizing it as a louche insurrectionary gesture. The result for students is of course wasted potential, not merely of their individual acting out, but for a whole form of wasted class revolt.

In Herrera-Prats's multi-part installation at Art in General, she explores the development of mass testing and optical grading technologies beginning in the 1920s through their adoption as voter ballot counters in the 1970s to desktop scanners today. Traveling through archives in Iowa, New Jersey, and New York, she photographically documented, using a 4 by 5 inch camera and the scanners available at each of these archives, the various prototype machines that effectuated the robot work of scoring standardized tests that is the counterpart to students' ape-like task of completing them. Additionally, Herrera-Prats probed deeper into these archives, recovering correspondence between the machine's main inventors—Reynold B. Johnson, Henry Chauncey, and Everett Franklin Lindquist—who viewed testing primarily as a zone of entrepreneurial expansion while simultaneously promoting the adoption of standardized testing as a meritocratic tool guaranteeing equal opportunity. Though these men are not household names, the alphabet soup of institutions and assessment tests they founded or represented—IBM, Educational Testing Service (ETS), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and American College Testing (ACT)—are behe-moths in the field of higher education testing.

Automating intellectual labor came part and parcel with the quantification of previously qualitative precincts of thought. What emerges from Herrera-Prats's research is the fatuous manner in which these men believed that "efficient" technologies would realize principles such as equality of opportunity. However, in the case of fill-in-the-bubble tests adept test takers master the process by internalizing codes of translation—converting complicated possibilities into one of a repetitious set of five discrete, lettered solutions.

In a slide projection accompanying the photos and scans in the gallery, Herrera-Prats collages images of ovals of test sheets marked with random arrangements; some are shown with nearly all ovals filled in, others emerge with a hint of pattern. She removes frames depicting the acting hand, and the spectral labor results in a surfeit of information as the legibility of the form to its intended recipient-reader, the scoring machine, is effaced while the "drawing" becomes more complete. As Walter Benjamin once wrote, "A drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing."[2] Here the binary and robotic qualities of the test are exposed; each answer line has an on/off quality, with only one possible field representing success. If more than one oval per line is covered, that is, anything in excess of the "on" oval in a single line, "background" takes over and the drawn portion ceases to have semiotic meaning in the machine's registration process. As each successive oval is completed beyond the test's designated logic of the single mark, the compulsive element of the exam is laid bare.

The slide show intermingles these seemingly haphazard registrations with images of Scantrons inscribed to form words such as "SAT," "surf," "flunk," "smile," and "TOEFL," (the latter is the acronym for the Test of English as a Foreign Language, an exam all immigrants are required to pass before entering higher education programs in the United States). Again Jeff Spicoli bobs to the surface; Herrera-Prats's work demonstrates the process in which a test-taker's pique leads to a decision to "fuck up" the test and thereby tacitly accept

a future of failure. Her work charts the psychological effects of Johnson, Chauncey, and Lindquist's overemphasis on standardized testing for educational placement and advancement; the slide show conveys the sinking feeling we have when we realize that the test matters more than any subjective or qualitative assessment. As such, Herrera-Prats's is a timely intervention: one of historical recovery of a time in the early 20th century when the wedge of standardized testing was insinuated into the prospect of democratic access to mass education.

1. Thank you Jeremy Sigler for substantiating this scene.

2. Benjamin, "Painting, or Signs and Marks," in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 83.