

# The UnSanctioned Surface:

## *Discovering Daughters' Agency at Play*

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### VIDEO TRANSCRIPT<sup>1</sup>

*BLACK.* We hear a child's voice.

#### **LEXIE V.O.**

Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to my show!

*TITLE:* From the voice of an adult, Gunther Kress [(1997)]: "Children, as all will admit, are not competent users of adult systems; and so

*we can see what it is they do to make their practiced, finely honed and quite 'natural' competence of adults. We see that they have 'interests'. Too often these appear as a nuisance to the adult."*

*The SOUND of CRAYON coloring on a wall reveals a younger LEXIE standing along the scribbled wall.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the spirit of writing about annotated spaces such as interior walls, furniture, and skin, I further reflect here in an annotated transcript as meta-annotation. I have written elsewhere (Forthcoming) about annotating surfaces less domestic than those I discuss in this video— annotations I call "public marginalia": remarks and re-remarks inscribed on sometimes transgressed surfaces—for example, conversational graffiti in public restrooms or Post-It messages advocated by such movements as Subway Therapy or Operation Beautiful. I present this transcript as an attempt to remark on (and re-mark) ideas situated in the video as endnotes in order to maintain the integrity of the transcription itself.

That said, this video is not simply a representation of text or remediated paper, as I heed the cautions of Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (2014) and of Gesa E. Kirsch (2015). In their exploration of compositionists' sometimes uncritical use of new media in the classroom, Alexander and Rhodes warn specifically that the field's "embrace of digital video often invites students to participate in the production of multimedia texts but, at the same time, often separates those texts from a robust consideration

of the rhetorical affordances of video" (p. 71). I find it, actually, more difficult to discuss and teach such rhetorical affordances to students if I cannot do it myself. Kirsch warns those who produce video scholarship to not simply read an academic "paper" set to the backdrop of visuals and music—that any circulation of academic discourse should consider their rhetorical situations. I further take up Jonathan Alexander's (2015) call to consider richer contexts of multimodality that rely on modes—such as Alexander's own objects of study, sound, and voice—"as part of a process of the invention of identity, or as embodied experiences that produce, complicate, and perhaps even deconstruct identity and its performances" (p. 77). Throughout the video, then, I use modes "not just as purveyors of discursive knowledge, but as components of embodied and material meaning making in their own right" (p. 86). The voice, the hand, the foot, and the sounds of my breath, the fights with the camera—all play roles in the video but are also rhetorical tools with which I have composed, recognizing that "the body is an active location of both knowing and being, of both contact and resistance" (Garrett et al., 2012, l.ii, par. 4).

*MONTAGE of children's marks on surfaces, revealing their creators' names: LEXIE and VIVIEN.*

**AUTHOR**

Here's a familiar childhood trope:

**LEXIE V.O.**

You started it!

**VIVIEN V.O.**

You started it! . . .

**AUTHOR**

Admittedly, *I* started it. On a snowy February day in 2010. I began documenting the growth of my first daughter, Lexie, when she was two years old, penciling in her height on one of the walls of her bedroom. And, then, the next year I added her little sister, Vivien, as a baby.

I had documented their growth as someone who helps to shape these little bodies, inadvertently giving them permission to document their own growth as authors of their own little bodies. At some point, the two acts physically merge: their own marks maturing, growing more focused and intentional, overriding by writing over my own authorship of them.

*LEXIE and VIVIEN build something in the backyard.*

A resurgence of free-play and free-range movements is encouraging parents and caregivers to encourage

their children to gain agency through unstructured experiences with their own and Othered spaces and places. Playing in a vacant lot, walking alone to school or to a friend's, children hone their autonomy, embrace risk, and situate themselves among other guardians of independence, such as—in my case—their parents.

In this episode, I explore ways of making such agency through the lenses of my two daughters' experiences with free play, particularly Lexie's early literacy practices mediated by diverse material surfaces, fixed surfaces such as interior walls and an alleyway blacktop that she transforms through these signifying practices. Fixed surfaces are not simply physically fixed by their infrastructure but also by the ideologies that construct their various purposes. Walls, for example, are inherently static: they are physically put up to theoretically stay up. Their purposes can be to fortify, defend, and confine—keeping their spaces tightly controlled. But defending walls can at times offend. They can exploit the ideological boundaries of their own making by pushing back on the control they have been constructed to uphold. Intimately bound to any public space they can encourage participants to remediate that space, to “loosen” it from its fixed purposes: Urban design theorists Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens

(2007) define loose space as one “that has been appropriated by citizens to pursue activities not set by a predetermined program” (p. 29). “For a site to become loose,” the authors say, “people themselves must recognize the possibilities inherent in it and make use of those possibilities for their own ends, facing the potential risks of doing so” (p. 2).

As other children do, my own girls explore such possibilities by taking creative risks in and on spaces considered tight, or “unsanctioned” by some authority—spaces such as their own bedroom walls, furniture throughout the house, and their own skin. These spatial-rhetorical practices demonstrate my daughters’ tactics of writing on spaces, thus writing themselves into spaces, inscribing their own agencies.

Their work has fostered my own: undermining dominant patriarchal models for raising girls, I encourage these practices and consider them an

evolution of generative literacy skills. My casual observations over the years have revealed a now complicated, layered exploration of more than just how children use unsanctioned physical surfaces for signifying practices; they have encouraged me to consider the liminal and hyphenated surfaces of father-scholar, daughter-subject, daughter-scholar, father-subject. These subjectivities are themselves unsanctioned spaces within traditionally masculinized approaches to research.<sup>2</sup>

A couple of other literacy father-scholars are helping me return to pre-digital definitions of multimodality<sup>3</sup> and their implications for children’s ways of making meaning and agency. Gunther Kress (1997), for example, says that children make meaning “in an absolute plethora of ways, with an absolute plethora of means, in two, three, and four dimensions.” These ways involve “different kinds of bodily engagement with the world—that is,

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<sup>2</sup> I am implicitly arguing for scholars of rhetoric and writing studies to further embrace the rhetorics and voices of children, collaborating with the work of colleagues in early literacy education and the like. I focus in this video on the intersections of embodied genre knowledge and early literacy in particular. I discuss later the work of Carol Berkenkotter (with Amanda Thein, 2005). Russell Hunt (1994) consults his own daughter to discover genre knowledge as socio-linguistic construction, relying on Bakhtinian notions of the utterance within a dialogic chain. Donovan and Smolkin (2006) trace several studies of children’s written genre knowledge through rhetorical, social, and empirical genre traditions.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to equate multimodality with digital approaches, however. I use the term “pre-digital” only to denote recent conversations about digital multimodality throughout the growing community of scholars who produce such affective work, composing their own mediascapes through video or other digital modes (e.g., Arroyo & Alaei, 2013; Hidalgo, 2015; Hidalgo, 2016; Hidalgo, 2017; Kyburz, 2010; Leston et al., 2011; Reid, 2010). I situate my own daughters’ more analog forms with the work of scholars and makers who embrace the embodied nature of multimodality (e.g., Alexander, 2015; Garrett et al., 2012; Rhodes & Alexander, 2012; Rhodes & Alexander, 2015; Shipka, 2015).

not just sight as with writing, or hearing as with speech, but touch, smell, taste, feel” (p. xvii).

*LEXIE at age two plays with PlayDoh.*

**LEXIE**

I want to make a baby bumblebee.

**AUTHOR OFF SCREEN**

You’re making a baby bumblebee?

**LEXIE**

Uh-huh. *(Pause.)* I wanna make a rhyme.

**AUTHOR OFF SCREEN**

You wanna make a what?

**LEXIE**

I wanna make a rhyme.

**AUTHOR OFF SCREEN**

A rhyme?

**LEXIE**

I’m making a duckie.

**AUTHOR OFF SCREEN**

A duckie? Boy, you have lots of things that you want to make.

**AUTHOR**

Looking at his own daughter’s early literacy practices, Stephen Hill (2015) echoes Kress. Multimodal ways of building children’s narrative, he says, “often involve a combination of many different modes [children use] such as gesture, speaking,

singing, drawing, and writing.” Through these ways, “children construe and reconstrue their world weaving together real and imagined events, characters, and feelings [...]” (p. 303).

*An older LEXIE introduces a performance beside a drawing she’s made on the blacktop alleyway beside her house. She steps toward the camera, pretending to hold a microphone as she announces*

**LEXIE**

Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to my show! I made a masterpiece. So I would like to sing a song about my masterpiece. It is called “Lexie’s Masterpiece.” Written by Lexie. Illustrated by Lexie. Wrote by Lexie. Thank you.

*She steps back toward her masterpiece and begins singing.*

**LEXIE**

Oh mister, mister, mister, mister, mister

Masterpiece!

Mr. Masterpiece, Masterpiece, Masterpiece

I would like to congratulate my little little masterpiece . . .

**AUTHOR**

And I would like to add to Kress and Hill’s conversation another mode of making meaning: the surface upon which kids have “different kinds of bodily engagement,” surfaces

through which they reconstrue their world, surfaces that they have yet to factor into their budding genre knowledge. I'm following the definition Carol Berkenkotter (2005) gives with her work with Amanda Thein following her earlier work with Thomas Huckin. It's a definition of genre knowledge that attends to the "tacit understandings of the 'decorum' of the moment in response to the contextual cues of a particular setting" (p. 116). My daughter Lexie has grown to understand this ideological sense of appropriate literacy activities performed through appropriate and sanctioned behavior, on appropriate and sanctioned spaces.

Within such structured spaces, according to Berkenkotter, children "learn to mean' in the context of tools and artifacts, genres, and contextual clues" (p. 122).<sup>4</sup> But I want to embrace the surfaces in certain contexts where children are still learning by simply playing with tools, artifacts, and genres perhaps without any clue; they are surfaces that children are trying to make appropriate for themselves, to loosen

from their tight construction, regardless of their being assigned "inappropriate" and "unsanctioned" by us big people. These are the surfaces that simply call to us, that simply want to play.

Play is certainly one of the ways that children make meaning, according to psychologist Susan Engel (2005), as they "construe the world and navigate the boundaries that give shape to their experience" (p. 94). These boundaries are of course sometimes quite material, tightened by parents' and others' concerns for kids' safety, well-being, and future. And children eventually gain the genre knowledge of navigating such boundaries, spaces, and concerns just as much as they do traditional literacies and their forms. Knowing where to go when and how and all the other aspects tied up in that knowing grows out of understanding how learning to know is part of an ideological system that adults rely on to navigate their own experiences.

As Kress (1997) notes, one of the problems with trying to understand the ways kids do things is because we're trying to fit them within our

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<sup>4</sup> Berkenkotter discusses how children build embodied genre knowledge in the setting of a Montessori school particularly, as their speech genres "are embedded in physical activities and mediated by the artifacts around them" (123). These artifacts, and associated tools, are those expected in such settings: books, games, paper, writing, coloring, and other art instruments, and

the like, as well as those reflecting, Berkenkotter says, "everyday living: hammers and nails, brooms, dish soap and towels, child-size kitchen sinks, and a number of other domestic tools and artifacts" (124). I note later in the video how Lexie herself uses such repurposed domestic tools—like a screwdriver—to play with.

own ways of seeing—when children at various stages of their lives just don't see things that way yet. Kress says that when children are developing early literacy skills they are “in charge, they choose the materials which best serve their sign-making purposes, they construct the signs as plausible, apt expressions of *their* interest, and act transformatively on them. In this process they also produce their own materials of representations, which often depend only very indirectly or not at all on the adults' systems” (p. 33). As an adult, and as someone who is deeply invested in his own children's literacy skills, I have a challenge ahead of me in trying to make sense of those skills. I want to see that my children know that they know. But Kress cautions me. He says, “The incredulous response to attribution of intention is [...] quite common in relation to things that adults do ‘naturally’, automatically, unreflectingly” (p. 35). He later advises that our adult eyes focused on children's meaning-making have “not permitted an understanding of [children's] actions in their terms. Children's interests have been invisible because of the dominant power of adult interests” (p. 88).

Susan Engel (2005) agrees: This is about children's interests, children's experiences and the ways they see them, the ways they navigate them. They haven't learned the adult ways

of doing things, the mature forms of genres, because they haven't picked up on clearly defined purposes for any one way of doing things, of any one genre. Genres, of course, can take many forms for kids: during play, a screwdriver can become any method of inscription, but we can also imagine how a child can use any tool to inscribe a message on a sign. It is simply what the child has at hand. There is nothing to say, of course, that adults can't or don't do the same—they certainly do. But we are more aware or are more concerned with the consequences of such behavior than are children. Though many of these forms, objects, spaces, and surfaces are certainly fixed by the ideologies of such consequences, children can unfix them by discovering creative uses with what is already around them, what is already at hand, and situate themselves among such things and spaces for their own varied purposes.

Play theorist Simon Nicholson (1972) discusses such things at hand and the creativity children use to manipulate them. Creativity, he says, is “the playing around with the components and variables of the world in order to make experiments and discover new things and form new concepts” (p. 5). Nicholson calls these variables “loose parts”: “In any environment,” he says, “both the degree of inventiveness and

creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it” (p. 6). Environmental psychologist Leanne Rivlin (2007) adds that “these are elements within a site that are amenable to manipulation and change” as well as having “the potential to lead to creativity and discovery” (p. 40). It is easy then to situate the idea of loose parts within loose spaces, as we revisit the definition provided by Franck and Stevens (2007), whose tightened spaces are made loose by participants who “must recognize the possibilities inherent in [them] and make use of those possibilities for their own ends” (p. 2).

It is not simply then a matter of taking advantage of loose parts that are already there in a space or provided for creative use such as by a teacher in a classroom; it can be a matter of children appropriating elements that have inherent purposes and revising them for different purposes.

But saying all this buys into the idea that play can indeed be purposeful, that it can be intentionally meaning-making beyond simply playing itself. Play theorist Stuart Brown (2009) defines play in part as “apparently purposeless. Play activities,” he says, “don’t seem to have any survival value. They don’t help in getting money or food. They are not done

for their practical value. Play is done for its own sake” (p. 17). But someone’s apparently purposeless playing assumes that the player seeks no practical value — that, however, doesn’t mean there isn’t practical value in the playing. It might emerge unintentionally, Brown says (p. 18), even later in life. Children or anyone playing at a particular moment may not intend for that play activity to offer any future practical value, such as this kid who was put up on a swivel chair to perform in front of others—a space that is otherwise an unsanctioned one: a dangerous rickety chair that if the child had been seen standing upon on his own would certainly have been scolded. But at this point, the chair has been given sanction by someone for the benefit of a now-sanctioned behavior, a little performance by a cute kid. At that moment, this kid is just playing.

But that moment of just playing may later open another moment of so-called real-world purpose encouraging the in-this-case grown child (just as cute with less hair), who has put himself in front of others, his students, to make meaningful connections between that moment of play decades ago and the present moment of practical value. It is inventive without intent. It is retrospectively heuristic. Play activities can perhaps unknowingly create the kairos for an opportu-

nity—and a space—that has yet to be realized. But sometimes children realize that they have been given the opportunity and the space to play even when the giver didn't intend to give it.

*AUTHOR rushes up the stairs to the second floor of his house.*

My wife is calling to me to come upstairs to see what our daughter has done in her bedroom. Now, as someone who studies forms of rhetorical, tactical underlife<sup>5</sup>, my reaction is not the same as my wife's.

*The girls' BEDROOM DOOR opens.*

**AUTHOR OFF SCREEN**

Wow, Lex. Look at what you did! What is that?

**AUTHOR**

That is a circus, Lexie says. That is Lexie's first encounter with drawing on a wall—as far as I know. And so it is the first encounter either her mom or I have had with how to handle it. My wife agrees that, yes, this is a circus and it's time to send in the clowns to help clean it up. But first, I have to set up a portrait of the artist as a young graffitist. Her mother, on the other hand, wants it gone. And later in the day, Lexie helps to erase it.

Lexie's drawing on walls became more prolific, as did drawing on other surfaces. These are, according to Kress, merely representational images of a sign-maker that one day may work their way into more communicative modes.

*Returning to LEXIE'S performance with her masterpiece.*

**LEXIE** (singing)  
Masterpiece . . .

**AUTHOR**

Drawing and writing on the walls eventually moved to drawing and writing on paper posted to the walls in forms of directionals and maps, announcements of shows she and her sister like to put on, and most recently a welcome to their new little brother, Max. Posted. All. Over. The house. This transition, of course, did not happen overnight, but I did note a couple of years beforehand one of Lexie's first attempts at performing a representational-cum-communicative event, showing evidence of embodied genre knowledge on what eventually became a sanctioned surface.

You'll remember Lexie's height.

*JANE THE FISH sits on top Lexie's bedroom dresser.*

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<sup>5</sup> See Brooke (1987); Molloy (2013).

Well, this is Jane. And this is Jane's height.

*LEXIE'S attempt to mark Jane's height.*

Many of the unsanctioned spaces throughout the house contain Lexie's representations, scribbles and drawings and things that may make sense only to Lexie, though I began it with a form of communication. Now, I did not knowingly sanction the surface *per se* but participated in a genre often applied to such a surface: recording height. Lexie may have deemed it appropriate herself because she saw that I had done so. She was also transferring the knowledge of what it means to record a measurement. She had done so with Jane and later on began to add to my own marks of her measurements.

Interestingly, very few communicative gestures ever appeared directly on unsanctioned surfaces themselves; they were mostly representational. Once Lexie started getting the idea of communicative genres, she for the most part abided by their decorum: you do some things on paper and then put the paper on the wall, which means having access to yet another surface: paper. Lots and lots of paper. Paper itself soon became an unsanctioned, tightly controlled surface by the authorities—her mom and me—after Lexie began

“borrowing” sheets of paper from the forbidden printer.

And it is her learning this difference between appropriate and inappropriate uses of certain surfaces, a rich rhetorical understanding, that is starting to have real purpose for Lexie. She is learning how to be an actor within an ecology of surfaces, attempting to negotiate the ideological factors wrapped up in it.

*A poster advertises a production of Shrek: The Musical.*

My wife teaches high school theatre and had recently directed a production of *Shrek: The Musical*. There's a princess named Little Fiona, who is locked up in a tower at the age of seven. Having waited now a mere 23 days for her prince to come, Little Fiona spends her time reading stories to her dollies and of course putting stuff up on her walls. Guess who else was seven . . .

*LEXIE performing Little Fiona.*

Even though her mom was the director, Lexie was still going to have to prove her stuff by auditioning for the show just like everybody else. But before her mom would for sure cast her, Lexie would have to practice with a voice coach to strengthen her singing. Weeks went by, forcing Lexie in the meantime to

continually ask, Do I get to play Fiona? Do I get to play Fiona? Do I get to play Fiona? To supplement her plea, Lexie did what she normally does when she really really wants something. She wrote a note to her mom, asking her to please, please cast her.

And this is how she wrote it. On the wall: “Little Fiona,” it says. “Mom please”. To the left of it repeats “Feona”, and what looks like 7 o’clock. This makes sense to us because the shows normally start at 7 p.m. But Lexie meant it as 7 years old, the shared age between Fiona and herself. Now, why on the wall? Why would Lexie try to persuade her mom through an action on a surface that her mom herself has not sanctioned? Wouldn’t Lexie turn to more appropriate methods? Like paper? No, Lexie says. You’re not supposed to take paper from the printer and use it for other things. So she wrote it here. She is making meaning through an unsanctioned surface that calls attention to itself simply because it’s unsanctioned. It’s not supposed to be there. What better way of getting noticed?

Lexie is rhetorically traveling along a liminal surface of being a good daughter who doesn’t write on walls and a communicator who takes risks. One of the risks she takes is helping her father find his own ways of discovering agency. As I’m

documenting her and Vivien’s progress, I find myself in a number of liminal positions: how do I situate myself as a father and as a scholar? It is challenging to shut the scholar down when I need to be only a father. It is just as challenging to shut the father down when I need to be a scholar. It isn’t as much as teaching children to learn the tight adult systems that help us make sense of language and genre and space—that is, to see how adults see. It is as well about our own willingness to unlearn how we see, to create a masterpiece and then dance about it, sing about it, write about it, reflect on it, see the inherent possibilities that can transform a surface into a mode of understanding others a little bit better. It is evident on a bedroom wall—where it isn’t supposed to be—where we have found another place to come together, a surface on which to share our own ways of knowing.

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## Music

(In order of use)

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