INTERTEXTUAL FLOWS: FROM ANCIENT OVID TO ROMANTIC POETS TO CONTEMPORARY DIRECTORS. POETRY AS EDUCATIONAL ANTI-EXILE IN *DEAD POETS SOCIETY* (PETER WEIR, 1989)

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"Everything is continually changing and nothing perishes."
(Publius Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses*, Fable III)

Abstract: *Harold Bloom's seminal work The Anxiety of Influence postulates a critical vision according to which poets are influenced in their writing by the different relationships they become engaged in with precursor poets. Bloom discerns the process by which the small minority of what he calls 'strong' poets manage to create original work, in spite of the pressure of influence in an Agon[1] that encloses six revisionary ratios. Peter Weir's film Dead Poets Society reads as an intertextual continuum, a form of homage paid to the grand poets of English and American literature, who are themselves indebted to the Ancient poet Ovid. With a focus on Bloom's revisionary ratios, the present paper aims to demonstrate that Weir's movie is a filmic intertext descending from Ovid, and the grand Romantic poetry becomes an educational manifest for the anti-exile of the mind appropriated to a contemporary audience.*
Keywords: *intertextuality, Harold Bloom, anxiety of influence, revisionary ratios, Peter Weir*.

The process of reading - whether fiction, poetry, drama, film - often involves flowing from one text to another, recognising patterns, making connections, flowing from descendants to disciples. Reading and critical interpreting invoke more than analysing stable structures or rigid sentences exiled in meaning, but rather fluid chameleonic syntagms that twist, twirl, intertwine. In doing so, these thrive from one text to another and become intertexts. Central to contemporary literary theory, the concept of *intertextuality* originates in 20th century linguistics in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*, 1974) and later derived new valences under Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal theories of literature and language (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (1981). It was Julia Kristeva (*Séméiôtiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse, 1969 /* English translation: *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 1980) who brought together the former theorists' definition of the term and designed the first articulation of intertextual theory in the late 1960, with in the same intention of disrupting notions of fix meanings and objective interpretation. The French structuralist and poststructuralist critics Gérard Genette (*Figures of Literary Discourse*, 1982) and Roland Barthes (The *Pleasure of the Text*, 1975) reshaped the term intertetuality and celebrated critical flexibility and pluralist readings. It was Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence*, 1973) who introduced a position rather antithetical to that of his predecessors and professed more rigid connections between one text and another. In a broader sense, beyond the world of literature, intertextuality may describe and explain aspects of relationality, interdependence, interconnectedness with the other art forms

[1] Deriving from an ancient Greek term defining *struggle* or *contest*, *Agon* means in Bloom's terms the attempt of a writer to resolve an intellectual conflict between his ideas and the ideas of an influential predecessor in which "the larger swallows the smaller" (xxiv)

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such as film, the media, music, painting, architecture or culture in general, in a widest approach to the term.

Bloom's version of intertextual theory was kindled by his interest in Romantic poetry, which foregrounds the element of interconnectedness between literature, criticism and film in the present study. Turning to a critical jargon originating in the Greek vocabulary of 'precursor' (father) and 'ephebe' (son), a combination of a rhetorical and a psychoanalytical approach to intertextuality, Bloom's contribution to the dynamics of contemporary literary theory relies on the fact that for him all texts are inter-texts. In his most widely read critical work, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), intertextuality is for Bloom a product of the fear of influence. This anxiety, the cornerstone of his account of literary writing and critical reading, not only concerns the inability to avoid what Barthes had professed as the already written and read, but also concerns writers' and readers' refusal to accept this status quo. Bloom articulates two positions as far as poetry writing is concerned: the first stance invokes a poet's unwilling desire to imitate the precursor's poetry, from which the poet first learnt what poetry was. The second position refers the poet's tentative desire to be yet original and offer a new angle.

Harold Bloom's six revisionary ratios

In his 1973 study, Bloom developed a list of six figurative misreadings which dominate modern poetry, which he called 'revisionary ratios'. Each stage is presented as an archaic terminology characteristic of Bloom's adroitness to blend modern critical theory with ancient traditions (Allen 136).

According to Bloom, poetical influence from the predecessors implies both contraction and expansion, since the ratios of revision suppose contracting, while the actual poem writing implies an act of expansion. The poetry written by the *ephebe* poets (Bloom 46) should have revisionary ratios accompanied by freshness of perspective: "Without Keats's reading of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, we could not have Keats's odes and sonnets. (...)Wallace Stevens (...) would have left us nothing of value but for Walt Whitman" (xxiii).

Bloom uses these revisionary ratios as a sum of concepts that define "intra-poetic relationships" (87) or different ways in which poets seek to rewrite, willingly or not, the works of previous poets. Bloom's study was concerned with the poets' shared indebtedness deriving from (mis)reading one another: "strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (7).

The first ratio, *clinamen* (in Bloom's words, *poetic misreading / misprision*), entails a process of correction performed by the later poet; the precursor poem went "accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves" (Bloom 14), is a form of poetic influence, part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism, which has changed its nature over time, has transgressed literature and stepped into other mediatic forms of representation such as political theory, psychology, theology, law, poetics, the media. Poetic influence, writes Bloom, when involving two strong authentic poets "always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (30). In his 1989 film, director Peter Weir could be enunciated as a poet, who professes *clinamen* towards the Romantic English poets and for their American counterparts. For example, Henry David Thoreau's poem that features on the front page of the poetry book Neil Perry receives is not an original poem by Thoreau, but a rearrangement of sentences from his from his seminal work, *Walden or Life in the Woods*. The passage containing the quotes seen in the movie actually reads:

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> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life.
>
> (Thoreau 86-87)

The second ratio, *tessera* (completion and antithesis) opens a relation in which the later poet (what Bloom calls the *ephebe*), provides what he considers necessary to complete the 'truncated' precursor poem or poet (Bloom 66) and this unfinished poem becomes thus revisioned. The poetry sessions in Keating's classroom could be regarded a form of *tessera*, in which the students' recitation of the classics become a form of 'password' in Bloom's terms, or "token of recognition" (idem 67) by the initiates. In Bloom's view, the *tessera,* as a completing link, is part of the intertextual fluid from ancient Ovid to the classical Romantic poets and further to the contemporary audience, in an instance of self-persuasion that the precursor's word may become outdated, forgotten if not refilled and completed by the ephebe. On the other hand, Walt Whitman is overwhelmed by *tessera*, since antithetical completion is an important relation that he engages in with his English Romantic precursors Keats, Shelley, Byron. Whitman objected to the Romantics' ornate and decorated language, "the apparent lack of concern for ordinary humanity, and the remoteness from the life of the century" (qtd. in LeMaster 23). They represented, as Whitman recognized, directions antithetical to his own.

Kenosis (repetibtion and discontinuity) is a revisionary act in which "an emptying or ebbing takes place in relation to the precursor" (Bloom 88)[2]. Unlike the first two, which better describe poems, kenosis applies better to poets. The kenosis of the Romantic poets may be an emptying, an isolation from Ovid. This isolation was made possible by the temporal gap between the time frames, but also by the intention to find a new voice, different from that of their forefathers. In an ambivalent position, Bloom admits that each poet is caught up in a "dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets" (idem 91). In this respect Tom Schulman's script and Peter Weir's filmic text become a palinode[3], their own song to be sung in reversal as an homage to the classics of English literature and, by backward extension, as an homage to the ancient poets.

With *daemonization* (the counter-sublime): the poet believes that the parent-poem has inspired him while he writes his new poem, but the inspiration comes purely from imagination: "the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor (idem 15).

In *Dead Poets Society*, literature reading and critical thinking become a form of demonization, escaping the exile of the mind imposed by the stale canonical methods of teaching. Opposing these, Keating encourages his students to resist and to construct new forms

[2] To Bloom, *kenosis* has a wider significance than *clinamen* or *tessera* and implies more antitheses of meanings; the young poet reshapes, in the form of discontinuity, the patterns of the precursors in an act of intentional rewriting.

[3] The origin of the word is Gree: *palinōidia*. According to Plato, old poet Stesichorus turned blind after writing a poem insulting Helen of Troy. His received his sight back after writing a palinode in which he apologised. It was Stesichorus who used this term *palinōidia* (*palin, meaning* 'back' or 'again' and *aeidein,* meaning 'to sing'). The English poets of the 16th-century borrowed and altered the original meaning to refer to odes of their own.

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of honor and excellence. The relationship between the center of power (Welton and its 'tradition, honor, discipline, excellence') and the marginal John Keating and the Dead Poets Society may be reversed through the voices of the 'dead poets' (Keats, Byron, Thoreau, Whitman), who become enlivened and instrumental in the transformation from old to new pedagogy. Like the poets he quotes from, Keating is a Romanic hero himself: when he is blamed for the death of Neil Perry, one of his students, he refuses to challenge the charges of the headmaster, Mr.Knowland, and accepts to leave the school. His earlier pedagogical call to make one's life extraordinary proves mere rhetoric that limits rather than encourages one's ability to resist and change.

The fifth ratio, a*skesis* (purgation and solipsism): the poet adds a part of his own imagination to the poem making it different: "the precursor's endowment is also truncated" (ibid.), while in a*pophrades* (the return of the dead): the poet is back where he started from, i.e., the parent-poem, but with a difference: "the poem is now held open to the precursor, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us (...) as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work" (idem 16).

In this last ratio, the filmic text of *Dead Poets Society* can be read as a 20th century *Ars amatoria* (Art of Love)*:* Ovid wrote his poem as a mockery on the art of seduction and intrigue regarding the superficial Roman aristocracy at the court of emperor Augustus, too often devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, Peter Weir's film is, similarly, another form of didactic irony, critical of the goals of conservative teaching in the American private schools in the 1950's. Through the voice of young and rebellious teacher John Keating, the director regards literature, in general, and poetry, in particular, as instrumental to the students, who have the chance to leave the exile of the mind imposed by the regimentation at Welton College, whose four pillars of education are *Tradition, Honor, Discipline, Excellence*. Instead, the English teacher John Keaton (another intertextual adagio to the name of John Keats) encourages his students to become free thinkers through various means of liberal pedagogy. Thus, the teacher engages himself in a relationship of *tessera* with the American transcendentalist poet Henry David Thoreau. As the latter's work was a personal declaration of independence, engaging social expression, a journey of spiritual discovery, satire, and a study book for liberation and self-reliance, the former invites his students to become independent spirits: "I always thought the idea of educating was to learn to think for yourself" (Schulmann 19)[4].

Ovid influenced his disciples at another level of intertextuality; love is the dominant theme of Ovid's early poem the "Amores" ("The Loves"), and passion also guides Ovid's magnum opus "*Metamorphoses"*. Similarly, the film also reads as an elegy for the long-lost values of classical poetry and Keaton places 'love' and 'beauty', the main tenants of Romantic poetry, as central to his contemporary world:

> But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for. To quote from Whitman: "O me, o life of the questions of these recurring, of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities filled with the foolish (..) That life exists, and identity. That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.
>
> (*DPS* 00 00:12:35)[5]

[4] Quotes from Tom Schulmann's film script *Dead Poets Society* are parenthetically marked as Schulmann, followed by page number.

[5] Quotes from Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society* are parenthetically marked as *DPS*, followed by hour: minute: second.

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Also descendant from Ovid, the hexameter verse employed by the poet in his *Metamorphoses* became the heroic verse in Romantic poetry. Poets like Lord *Byron*, Percy Blysshe Shelley and John Keats reworked the pattern of the hexameter, but it is Byron who is intertextually inserted in the film: "She walks in beauty like the night. / Of cloudless climes and starry skies. / All that's best, dark and bright, / Meet in her aspect and her eyes. Apart from the above Romantic English poets, William Shakespeare, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau also become part of the filmic intertext and become re-enlivened in the readings of the students. The Dead Poets were dedicated to "sucking the marrow out of life", a quotation by Henry David Thoreau that used to be invoked at the beginning of each meeting of the poetic circle that Keating had founded when he himself was a student at Welton. "You see we'd gather at the old Indian cave and take turns reading from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley; the biggies" (*DPS* 1:23:22), declares Keaton to his students when he explains the history of the Dead Poets Society. For Keating, poetry offers the "basis not for social-empowerment but self-empowerment" (Giroux 84). The teacher's constant invocation of the Latin motif *Carpe Diem* "Carpe Diem, lads, Seize the day! Make your lives extraordinary" (*DPS* 00 00:47:02) equates a pedagogical resistance to dominant social forms that try to make the students at Welton comply with the "hierarchies of domination that inform the organization of the school, the curriculum, and the social formations that influence a wider society" (Giroux 85).

Poetry and film as educational anti-exile

In her study entitled *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies,* Margaret Miles points out that it would be an ethical and pedagogical mistake to allow students to believe that films are merely about entertainment, or at the same time to suggest that the pleasure of entertainment is identical to the "learned pleasure of analysis" (123). Scrutinizing the pleasure of entertainment in films, James Snead suggests "It never has been enough to just see a film—and now, more than ever, we need, not just to 'see' but to 'see through' what we see on the screen" (131). Seeing through films means developing the critical skills that will provide the insights as to how the ideological and affective work in combination to offer up particular ways of viewing the world that come to matter to individuals and groups. Films assume a major educational role, and Peter Weir's film is no exception in its attempt to attune the lives of contemporary students that form part of intended audience of the film. American author, feminist, educator and social activist bell hooks claims that the pedagogical importance of such films, both in terms of what they teach and the role that they can play as objects of pedagogical analysis cannot be underestimated and comments about her own use of such instructive films: "It has only been in the last ten years or so that I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read" (hooks 2).

The opening scene of the film reveals Welton as an elitist preparatory school, with the promising aestheticism of an Ivy League college and impressive elements of Gothic architecture. The students and teachers are part of a cultural capital whose significance is "privilege, wealth, power" (Giroux 42). The norms of social identities in the film are identified within the discourse of the privileged white, patriarchal, heterosexual. In the opening address to the parents and students of Welton, headmaster Nolan presents the record of academic achievement by emphasizing that over 75 per cent of its graduates go to an Ivy League college. But in its academic definition of success, Welton is little if not at all preoccupied to teach its students how to think, but rather to prepare them to achieve positions of power to the detriment of knowledge.

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With a view to this, the educational goals at Welton do not include critical agency or ethical responsibility. As the film narrates the teaching patterns, it soon becomes obvious that the curriculum is of the inflexible type of the traditional canon, and so are the methods of obtuse teaching. Mr. Nolan clarifies the Welton pedagogy: "Well, John, the curriculum here is set. It's proven it works" (*DPS* 1:45:34).

This status quo is challenged with the arrival of the new English teacher, who is bold and outspoken. He preaches students out of the old decadent schooling: in the first class, he breaks away with the 'old school' and traditional standards, by having students rip out the introduction to their poetry book, by 'famous' J. Evans Pritchard, PhD: "Armies of academics going forward, measuring poetry. No, we will not have that here. No more of Mr. J. Evans Pritchard" (*DPS* 01:13:34).

The film's story line becomes filled with crucible emotions and John Keating startles his students into an expanded awareness of life's possibilities through the joys of great literature, challenging them to follow Thoreau's call to "suck the marrow out of life" (Thoreau qtd. in Schulmann 24). Upon this challenge, the boys resurrect the secret Dead Poets Society—a club whose members include the spirits of Whitman, Shelley, and other "biggies" (ibid.). They begin meeting superstitiously in a cave, where they read verse in a state of inflamed passion. Keating does not want them to read poetry, he wants them to undertake the English class and study English poetry as a form of interactive cultural production. According to him, poetry is about the relationship between passion and beauty, it is becomes a liberating educational tool: "But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for" and he continues: "That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse" (*DPS* 00:57:34). So, Keating drops traditional teaching which offers the premises of social empowerment and infuses classical poetry into his students; it is the poems of the British and American classics, from Shakespeare to Whitman, which become a manner of self-empowerment. More importantly than mere literature, Keating teaches them a life philosophy through the leit motif Carpe Diem: "Carpe Diem. Seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary". This instigation is also a form of student resistance against any form of manipulation, and conventionalism. It is various forms of conventionalism that Keating preaches against, by asking his students to climb on their desks so that they can see the world from another angle. Also, in another class, Keaton takes the boys out in the school yard and gets them to march in different strides, so that they could learn how to go against the stream and find "their own walk".

In *Dead Poets Society*, resistance demands no sacrifices but an implicit attempt to deconstruct the relationship between the center of power (Welton and its centrism on tradition, honor, discipline, excellence) and the marginal Keating and the Dead Poets Society. In this marginality, the voices of the 'dead poets' (John Keats, Lord Byron, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman) become enlivened and instrumental in the metamorphosis from old to new pedagogy. Like the poets he quotes from, Keating is a Romanic hero himself: when he is blamed for the death of Neil Perry he refuses to challenge the charges of the headmaster, and accepts to leave the school. His earlier pedagogical call to make one's life extraordinary proves mere rhetoric that limits rather than encourages one's capability for struggle and self-determinism.

As demonstrated in *Dead Poets Society*, resistance to the status quo and the implicit metamorphosis is a rupture of conventions and received rigid social realities. In this respect, Peter Weir's film attempts to depict the1950s as a conformist society. Despite the fact that almost all the students in the group sign a statement that will lead to the demise of their teacher, the boys prove that they have been taught into non-conformity: in a canonical final scene, the

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students, who are now taught English by the headmaster Mr. Nolan, step one by one on their desks, as a proof of support for Keating, who is leaving the room and the school. Keating farewells them with a "*Thank you, boys"*(DPS 00:1:58:34 , proving that resistance to repressive authority is reshaped into a discourse of politeness, which cancels out dominating relations of power and those who are compliant with it.

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Michel Foucault's post-structuralist ratio between knowledge and power assumes a new proportion with Peter Weir, who asserts that the substitute of stifling textbooks and old approaches is British and American Romanticism of the 19th century, rather than the socially and aesthetically engaged criticism of the day. In a confessional line, Weir states he has left behind any inclination to deal with overt mystical or spiritual themes in his films: "I've tried, to some extent, to disassemble my style, to fight against my own signature" (qtd. in Tibbetts 181-182) Nevertheless, the director expects that the mysterious undercurrents that make his films distinctive will continue to surface.

Peter Weir's film becomes a manifestation of *apophrades* (the return of the dead), part of whose purpose is to turn the attention of a contemporary audience and make them read Thoreau, Shelley, Whitman, often quoted in the film, differently. It is as if, as Bloom put it: "the final phase of great modern poets existed neither for the last affirmation of a lifetime's beliefs, nor a *palinode*, but rather as the ultimate placing and reduction of ancestors" (147). The film *Dead Poets Society* expresses less of an anxiety of influence but rather a longing for the influence of the classics, whose return might have the power to transform the knowledge of the contemporaries: both that of youngsters on the reel who become the object of professor Keating's teaching of and, to the same extent, of the contemporary audience in the real world.

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