

158 Abu Ghraib

Abu Ghraib (Un)becoming Photographs: How can Art Educators Address Current Images from Visual Culture Perspectives?

Nancy Pauly

Newsweek reported that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld “ignored Colin Powell’s presentation of the Red Cross evidence of abuses in Iraqi prisons. . .[until] the pictures made him realize the seriousness of the reported behavior—the ‘words [in Pentagon reports] don’t do it.’” (Alter, 2004, p.31)

On Friday, May 7, 2004 the front page of *The New York Times* contained two photographs and a headline: “From Picture of Pride to Symbol of Abuse” (Dao, 2004, p.1). In the top photograph Lynndie R. England appears in 2003, smiling, standing in a relaxed family setting, and wearing a blue “Authentic USA” hooded sweatshirt with red and white lettering. Until early May that photo had been displayed in the Mineral County West Virginia Courthouse with other photographs of local soldiers stationed in Iraq.



Figure 1: photographs, *Pfc. Lynndie R. England*, December 2003 family photograph, and with an Iraqi prisoner at the Abu Ghraib prison. *New York Times*, May 7, 2004, p. A1

Below, the photograph of Private First Class Lynndie England, 21, shows her standing; wearing a brown T-shirt, camouflage pants, and boots; holding a leash; and, looking down dispassionately at the body of a naked Iraqi man with that leash around his neck on the floor of the Abu Ghraib prison. This image appeared repeatedly on television and in other publications, such as *Newsweek* (Thomas, 2004, p.26-27) and *Time* (Wallis, 2004, p. 38-39), the following week. This photograph, and others like it, was taken by soldiers on December 12, 2003 (Hersh, 2004b, p. 38) to document the behavior of United States' soldiers with Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad, Iraq. The

photographs contained images such as hooded or naked Iraqi men in sexually suggestive poses, connected to electrical wires, forced to masturbate, piled on top of each other, threatened with dogs, or dead. Several photographs juxtaposed restrained naked Iraqi men with White women soldiers who were smiling or making “thumbs up” gestures next to the genitals or over a dead body.

On April 29 the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison aired on CBS's *60 Minutes II*. In the days that followed, these pictures were circulated around the world as part of a massive media event. These prison photographs provided evidence that forced the Bush administration to investigate incidents reported by the International Red Cross nine months earlier, but ignored until the photographs emerged. *Newsweek* reported that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld “ignored Colin Powell’s presentation of the Red Cross evidence of abuses in Iraqi prisons . . . [until] the pictures made him realize the seriousness of the reported behavior—the ‘words [in Pentagon reports] don’t do it.’ [Rumsfeld said]” (Alter, 2004, p.31). Rumsfeld knew about the photographs in February but “said that he had not actually looked at any of the Abu Ghraib photographs until some of them appeared in press accounts. . . When he did, they were ‘hard to believe,’ he said. ‘There are other photos that depict . . . acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel, and inhuman’” (Hersh, 2004b, p. 41). Rumsfeld admitted that even more objectionable pictures existed that were not released to the media, which reportedly contained images of soldiers raping Iraqi women prisoners.

The vivid Abu Ghraib prison photographs became the visual culture fulcrum for an international media event that provoked discussion, outrage, and action in May of 2004. On May 7 the *New York Times* reported, “Mr. Bush said on Wednesday that the first time he saw or heard about the photos was when they appeared on television last week” (*New York Times Chronology*, 2004, p. A10). *Time* reported

that on May 5, President Bush went on Arab television “to proclaim the abusive treatment ‘abhorrent behavior’ that ‘does not represent the America that I know’. His words weren’t enough to dent the outrage of Muslims who wondered why he failed to apologize. A day later Bush finally said he was sorry, but America’s image in much of the Arab world may well be irredeemable. U. S. officials tried to portray the sordid scenes as the isolated acts of a few low-ranking soldiers who were violating U.S. policy . . . [b]ut the horror stories keep coming . . . [of] ‘numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton abuse’ for months” (McGeary, 2004, p.28). Senate investigations began on May 7 during which time Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld and several generals were asked to explain the incidents surrounding the images.

As an art educator, teacher educator, and human rights advocate, I reacted strongly to the images and made connections to other experiences, thoughts, memories, histories, and feelings during this media event. I watched television coverage and purchased magazines, newspapers, and books to learn how other people articulated these photographs as cultural narratives. Upon reflection I asked myself, if art teachers wanted to address these photographs, or other photographs in the news, from visual culture perspectives, what theories or questions would I recommend to guide them and their students? I also considered what suggestions I could offer regarding making art regarding these, or other, current photographs in the media?

This article aims to explore the multiple ways that teachers and students might investigate, analyze and interpret images in the mass media from visual culture perspectives, such as the images photographed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003. First, Abu Ghraib photographs are explored from diverse approaches as advocated by visual culture scholars using key concepts such as: representation, power/knowledge/truth, image, cultural narratives, and intertextual articulation. Next, I explore my own reactions to experiencing the

media event surrounding the Abu Ghraib photographs and discuss a collage I made in response another tragic event. Finally, suggestions are given about how a teacher could investigate these images with students from visual culture perspectives and how students might respond to popular media culture through creative works using collage and assemblage.

Since visual cultural studies is a transdisciplinary field of study, this article is informed by theories proposed by scholars in cultural studies such as Foucault (1980), Hall (1997) and Sturken and Cartwright (2001); art historians such as Mitchell (1997) and Mirzoeff (1998); art educators such as Duncum (2001), Tavin (2001), Garoian and Gaudelius (2004), and Barrett (2003); and media critics such as Kilbourne (1999), Ewen (1988), and Jhally (1987).

Representation

Representation is both a concept and set of practices. "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* [author's emphasis] involve the use of language, of signs and images, which stand for or represent things" (Hall, 1997, p.15). According to Hall (1997) we *encode* and *decode* words and images based on the conceptual maps that we carry in our heads. People from the same culture usually interpret meanings similarly based on their shared histories, values, and codes of representation. We also construct new meanings based on *intertextual* connections we make through memory and associations with prior experiences and other "cultural texts" (such as books, movies, television, and games) that remind us of these images or narratives.

All images are *encoded* with meanings by the maker and must be *decoded* by the viewer according to their particular set of cultural assumptions, associations, and the larger cultural contexts in which

they are produced and viewed. "Their meanings lie not within the image elements alone, but are acquired when they are 'consumed,' viewed, and interpreted. The meanings of each image are multiple, they are created each time it is viewed" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 25).

While the Abu Ghraib photographs were taken by individual people, the person who recorded the image encoded them with social meanings based the history of images and psychological support systems that made those acts of photographing possible to imagine, think, feel, and do in this context. The photographer *encoded* the picture by framing the image and selecting certain items, and not others. He or she consciously, or unconsciously, made those decisions based on culturally-learned visual codes of representation, assumptions, associations, and the larger cultural contexts present at the time. Although these photographs are invested with meaning by their makers, surplus meanings resonate based on how each viewer engages the images and invests it with meanings based on their own histories, memories, associations, and their own sense of what this image means in terms of their own bodies and subjectivities.

Stuart Hall (1993) described three positions that viewers might assume when decoding meanings. Viewers may: (1) receive the dominant message in a rather passive unquestioning manner, (2) negotiate meanings actively by deciphering the imposed meanings and allowing an interplay with our own memories, knowledge, and cultural frameworks; and (3) oppose or challenge the ideological positions embodied in image or suggest the discourses operating within it.

In order to unpack the meanings encoded in images, Terry Barrett (2003) recommends asking students what is *denoted* and *connoted* when interpreting any form of visual culture. *Denotation* refers to identifying the subject matter and sensory qualities. *Connotation* refers to the symbolic or cultural meanings inferred by the juxtaposition of elements.

In the case of the image of Lynndie England and the unnamed Iraqi prisoner mentioned above, we might *denote* the representation of a small, young White woman, who is a soldier of the United States of America, standing next to a naked, reclining, Iraqi man in a Baghdad prison. She is holding a leash connected to his neck. She is wearing a tan v-neck t-shirt, camouflage pants, and boots. The man appears to be lying on a cement floor in a room with curtains hanging from open doors. He is reclining on his right side and is raising his head off the ground with his left hand. His right arm is outstretched and his right leg is bent in front of him. Converging lines in the room direct the viewers' attention to the woman. A diagonal line, created by the leash, connects the woman and the man.

The symbolic or cultural meanings that the viewer *connotes* from the photograph above will depend on how that viewer *articulates* (Hall, 1986/1996), or links, this image with other *images* and *cultural narratives* about humane/abusive treatment; male/female representations; images that include clothing and nudity between men and women; the meanings of standing and reclining in images; images using a leash or a noose around the neck of humans and animals; historical narratives and images about invaders or liberators; and the history of military prisoners and international conventions regarding war or occupation. These images are further filtered through religious and cultural beliefs such as appropriate relations between men and women, the proper use of sexuality, and the grounds for humiliation within cultures.

For example, a leash around the neck *connotes* the sense of inhumane treatment (since leashes are commonly used for animals). A tight noose, which might be used to discipline an animal, could strangle a man in this position. The noose may be associated with images of lynchings or enslavement, both carrying racial narratives about Europeans or Euro-Americans controlling the bodies of dark-skinned peoples. This kind of dehumanizing treatment by an invading army

suggests the forced imposition of power and the suppression of masculinity, human decency, and human compassion, the latter quality associated with woman but challenged here by the woman holding the noose.

Connotations will vary based on the viewer's cultural identification and the way he or she wants to use the image. A senior White House aide *connoted* the meaning of these photographs based on the intention of the soldiers to mean "the work of a handful of bad hats egged on by a ringleader who was doing it for kicks" (McGeary, 2004, p.34). The presentation of Iraqi prisoner and others conveyed a very different connotation in Arab communities. Hersh (2004b) reports, "[t]he photographing of prisoners, both in Afghanistan and in Iraq, seems to have been not random, but, rather part of the dehumanizing interrogation process . . . Hayder Sabbar Abd. . .one of the mistreated Iraqi prisoners . . . told Ian Fisher, the *Times* reporter, that his ordeal had been recorded . . . which added to his humiliation" (Hersh, 2004b, p.43). McGeary's *Time* article (2004) supports Hersh's report about the intended connotations for Moslem men. She writes, "One U.S. Official says that some FBI agents were well aware that the military was using 'very aggressive' interrogation methods that would not be condoned in the U.S. An Army officer seems to confirm that. Among Arab men, he tells *Time*, sexual insecurity is a powerful lever: fear of homosexuality and, almost as significant, female dominations, are particular issues" (p.34). Reporting from London on May 6 Cowell (2004) stated, "Abdelbari Atwan in *Al Quds Al Arabi*, a London based Arabic daily, [wrote] 'The torture is not the work of a few American soldiers. It is the result of an official American culture that deliberately insults and humiliates Muslims'" (Cowell (2004, p.10). These statements suggest different connotations but most people interpreted these images as dehumanization by psychological and physical force. While the experience of torture might only produce invisible psychological scars,

the documentation of shame is a social act meant to create outer evidence of humiliation.



Empathy and Respect

These photographs hail us not only as representations but also as images of persons with particular bodies. How can art teachers ask students to respect the images, and the people whose bodies we see, rather than approaching the photographs as voyeurs to be entertained? Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius (2004) ask us to think about the use of "spectacle," a concept defined by Debord (1967/1994). Spectacle "is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1967/1994, p.12). Garoian and Gaudelius (2004) explain that "images are ideological, they teach us what and how to see and think. They influence our choices and how we interact with one another. Considering this influence, we internalize the spectacle pedagogy of visual culture as naturalized dispositions in the body" (p.299). They advise art educators to examine the codes of mass communication but to be wary of voyeurism or other pleasures afforded through images generated for mass marketing and consumption. They cite bell hooks (1996, p.2) to make a helpful distinction between those who "consume visual culture to be entertained and those who seek it out to learn something" (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004, p. 299).

Mitchell (1997) thinks about visual culture as the "emphasis on the social field of the visual, the everyday processes of looking at others and being looked at" (p. 230). Mitchell goes further to personify pictures. He asks, "What do pictures want?" He responds that pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be leveled into the "history of images" nor elevated into a "history of art," but to be seen as individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities. He advises that we encounter an image, not as an object, but as a subject.

How might we encounter this image as a subject that reveals social relationships? Should the viewer enter into the picture with his or her imagination and become a friend of these pictures, a voyeur, a witness,

or assume some other relationship? Could we imagine ourselves in the position of the soldier or the detainee? What might this photograph suggest about how our bodies might be desired, endangered, or shamed? If human beings are capable of such acts, what might a person do to me? How might I be touched, harmed, or humiliated by persons from a society that condones acts like these? Could this happen to me if I were in jail in my hometown under the surveillance of these soldiers (some of whom were former prison guards)? Might the viewer participate in the power of the perpetrators or the vulnerability of the victims? Further, who are the victims, and are we, the viewers, among them if we do not discuss these events and respond?

Intentionality

Historically art teachers have discussed the intentions of the artist with their students. In visual culture studies, the viewer starts with the intentions of the individual who produced the image but also looks at the contexts that made his or her intentions meaningful. What were the soldiers' intentions for photographing these events? For whose gaze and for what audiences were these photographs intended? Do their motives matter? Do their behaviors reflect the thoughts of a collective mentality released from the constraints of clear rules and tight management? Were the photographs used to signify a trophy of power over subjugated prisoners, a sexual joke to amuse the guys back home, a sign of bravery, or inventive ways to interrogate detainees? Were the photographs originally designed as part of a battery of torture, to blackmail individual Iraqis, or to intimidate other prisoners to talk, as Hersh's (2004c, p. 42) research suggests? Or were some soldiers concerned about the treatment of detainees and wanted to use the photographs to document what they were being asked to do (as the lawyer defending one of the women maintained was her intent)?

Knowledge / Power / Truth

The work of Michel Foucault (1980) is important to consider when discussing the representation of the Abu Ghraib prisoners and soldiers in photographs from visual culture perspectives. One of Foucault's major contributions was to link "knowledge," "power," and "truth." Foucault argued that knowledge is a form of power and that people exert power when they use knowledge in certain ways that have real effects in the world. Writing about Foucault's ideas, Stuart Hall (1997) stated:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to *make itself true* [author's emphasis]. All knowledge once applied in the real world, has real effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practices." (Hall, 1997, p.49)

The "official truth" about the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal given initially by the Bush Administration was that a few soldiers had acted independently of military rules of conduct. For example, the *Chicago Tribune*, and most of the media during the week of May 7 -10, repeated Donald Rumsfeld's version of the scandal. "In testimony Friday, Rumsfeld portrayed the abuse as the aberrant behavior of a few rogue soldiers" (Glauber, 2004, p.10) or, more commonly they reported the story as "a few good apples, gone bad."

Secondly, Foucault did not speak of truth in an absolute sense, but rather as "regime of truth" in which each society permits certain things within a particular time and context.

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which

enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned . . . the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p.131)

Although a "regime of truth" may circulate, individuals may disrupt that dominant message and circulate it in new ways. In the case of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, Spc. Joseph Darby (372nd Military Police Company), an auto mechanic from rural Pennsylvania, did what Amnesty International, the International Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch could not. He challenged the sanctioned "truth" and "knowledge" but he used images to back him up. He obtained a CD containing pictures with the naked detainees, wrote a letter about what he knew, and put both under the door of Special Agent Scott Bobeck on January 13, 2004. The digital images, according to Seymour Hersh (2004a, p. 25), made the difference. When the Army's senior commanders realized the images were being swapped from computer to computer throughout the 320th Battalion, they knew they had a real problem. At 2:30 in the morning of January 14, Staff Sergeant Ivan L. Frederick II was searched and arrested. On January 16, the U.S. Central Command issued a press release about an investigation into the mistreatment of prisoners. It was at this point that Donald Rumsfeld said he first heard about the investigation. Hersh (2004a, p.26) reports that Rumsfeld informed President Bush soon afterwards. Darby, and a few other soldiers who supported him, challenged the military's "regime of truth."

Finally, Foucault also conceptualized power in a new way. Rather than viewing power as a force exerted from a central government to subjects below, Foucault envisioned *power as circulating* in a "net-like organization" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life- in private spheres of the family and sexuality as much as in the public spheres of politics, the economy, and the law. What's more, power is not only negative, repressing what it seeks to control. It is also *productive* [author's emphasis]. It 'doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as productive network which runs through the whole social body' (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). (Hall, 1997, p.50)

Foucault has discussed the study of "events," such as this scandal, as places where networks of cultural meanings are more visible and connected. In this case, the circulation of images through computers, television, and printed sources contributed to the disclosure of evidence and served as the kind of productive network that produced new knowledge. While conventional photographs are produced from a single plastic negative, the digital images, once released, might pollinate the social landscape in any direction and take on a variety of forms. Some of the photographs were made using cell phones with photo imaging, which were immediately sent to email addresses. These images "have legs," as they say in advertising. Unlike images that are carefully constructed as advertisement or propaganda, these images have a rough immediacy that seems to stem from some hidden collective consciousness of what humans might do to each other. The power of this new mode of circulating knowledge, truth, and power was evident on May 24, 2004 when Donald Rumsfeld banned the use of cellphones with cameras, digital cameras, and camcorders by U.S. Military in Iraq.

Foucault shifts our attention away from grand, overall strategies of power to notice what discourses of power/knowledge are used to discipline the bodies of particular individuals, and the social body as a whole, to regulate people to think and behave in certain ways, and not others.

Major General Antonio Taguba was another person who was willing to tell the truth as he saw it and challenge the conventional discipline. Hersh (2004a) writes,

As the international furor over Abu Ghraib grew, senior military officers, and President Bush, insisted that the actions of a few did not reflect the conduct of the military as a whole. Taguba's report, however, amounted to an unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest levels. The picture he drew of Abu Ghraib was one in which Army regulations and the Geneva Conventions were routinely violated, in which much of the day-to-day management of the prisoners was abdicated to Army military intelligence units and civilian contract employees. (Hersh, 2004a, p. 46)

According to Hersh, General Antonio Taguba suffered the fate of those who do not behave. "He's not regarded as a hero in some circles in the Pentagon," a retired Army general said of Taguba. "He's the guy who blew the whistle, and the Army will pay the price for his integrity. The leadership does not like to have people make bad news public" (Hersh, 2004, p. 43).

After May, the media event ended, and the story, more or less, disappeared as a media event. On August 25, at the end of the summer when few people are paying close attention to the news, a report was issued saying Army investigators found five military intelligence officers and "a handful of renegade military police guards were largely to blame" (Schmitt, 2004, p. A1). Hersh's research, however, suggests

that the abuses at Abu Ghraib are consistent with the policy authorized by Donald Rumsfeld in the summer of 2003 that “male prisoners could be treated roughly and exposed to sexual humiliation” (Hersh, 2004a, p. 59).

What do Images do? Are Images Real?

Do images Tell “the Truth”?

What is the role of *images* in constructing knowledge/power/truth? How are images linked to truth using *cultural narratives*? How are images connected to other images and cultural texts (such as books, movies, television, and toys) to construct meanings? How do images suggest consequences and choices? In order to answer these questions, it is important to analyze three concepts: image, cultural narratives, and intertextual articulation as tools for teaching from visual culture perspectives. This is necessary to learn how images have been used historically and what cultural or personal associations students might unconsciously associate with images to construct meaning.

Since the 13th century, the word “image” has referred to “mental conceptions, including a quite early sense of seeing what does not exist as well as what is plainly visible” (Williams, 1976, p. 158). The “truth” of images has been challenged historically such as a stick that appears to bend under water, yet images have held validity in terms of “common sense” (Gramsci quoted in Hall, 1986/96) truth. Popular wisdom exhorts us that “seeing is believing” as evidence of truth. Mirzoeff challenges this assertion by saying, “seeing is not believing but interpreting” (Mirzoeff, 1999, p.13).

Many current scholars have argued that images do not work predominantly on level of truth claims, that are debated rationally, rather images work on multiple emotional, physiological, and symbolic levels. Media theorists such as Jean Kilbourne (1999), Stuart Ewen (1988), and Sut Jhally (1987), who appeared in a video, *Ad and the Ego* (Boihem, 1996), have suggested that the potential power of visual

images lies in our emotional engagement, our need for symbolic meaning, and our cultural conditioning. Images, according to the three, arouse our aesthetic pleasure or revulsion, and invite our dreams, fantasies, fears, or desires. To extend this idea, Paul Duncum used the work of Guy Debord to argue that images "have become so common they not only fuse with reality but also have become reality. Images now often refer to each other rather than anything previously thought to be real" (Duncum, 2001, p.102).

In summary, images, by themselves, do not necessarily prove anything, yet they are powerful cultural artifacts to which we respond emotionally and symbolically. In addition to looking at meanings the Abu Ghraib photographs may encode, they must be treated with the respect due to the persons whose bodies are presented to the gaze of innumerable viewers. I advocate that students approach these images to investigate the "social relationship between people" (Debord, 1967/1994, p.12) that may influence students to see, think, and act in particular ways, as illustrated at the end of this article.

Cultural Narratives

People associate images with cultural narratives, or discourses, that they use for many purposes. Cultural narratives are a metaphor for the transparent cultural stories that people employ to interpret meanings and imagine their possibilities in the future, which is based on the work of Lyotard, 1984; Fiske, 1996; Gee, 1999; and Hall, 1986/1996. Narratives may take several forms: personal, familial, ethnic, racial, gendered, classed, sexualized, institutional, and "master" narratives. All of these types of narratives are potentially present when looking at these Abu Ghraib photographs.

The following example illustrates how personal, patriotic, military, and class-based narratives were used to explain Ms. England's actions. In a special report in *Newsweek* and *Time* on May 17, Lynndie England and her fellow soldiers were portrayed by families and friends

as “normal, patriotic Americans who put their lives on the line to serve their country but went astray because they followed orders” (Wallis, p. 38). Thomas (2004) reported that England’s “best friend, Destiny Goin, described England as ‘a caring person’ who adopted a stray cat in Iraq” (Thomas, 2004, p.27). The reservists of the 372nd Military Police Company in Cresaptown, MD were described as coming from the poor communities in valleys of Appalachia, many of whom signed on to receive college benefits. This personal narrative employed normalcy, patriotism, class, and kindness toward a cat as supportive evidence.

Narratives may be imagined and told differently based on the needs of the storytellers, which are usually based on their identification and vested interests. “Master” narratives, described by Lyotard, (1984) encompass major historical ways of thinking about progress, modernity, civilization, imperialism, and rationality, which have been used to legitimize European and United States’ dominance and imperialism in the world. The Abu Ghraib prison photographs also participate within narratives about who *we* are as members of groups, and who we consider to be “the Other.”

McGeary (2004) uses the personal story of Haider Sabbar Abed al-Abbadi, one of the photographed detainees, to construct the meanings from the point of view of “the Other.” Haider Sabbar Abed al-Abbadi told *Time* that he was never charged or interrogated yet he spent nine months in detention after his arrest for a petty scuffle. He reported knowing the photographs were taken “ ‘because I saw the flashbulbs go off through the bag over my head.’ He says he is the hooded man in the picture in which a petite, dark-haired woman in camouflage pants and an Army T-shirt gives a thumbs-up as she points to the prisoner’s genitals. He says he was in the pileup of naked men ordered to lie on the backs of other detainees as a smiling soldier in glasses looks on. And al-Abbadi says he was told to masturbate, though he was too scared to do more than pretend, as a female soldier flaunted

her bare breasts" (McGeary, 2004, pp. 27- 28). The *Time* article called these photographs, "raw cruelty of U.S. soldiers ridiculing the manhood of Iraqi captives . . . images of sadism [that] symbolized all that is going wrong with the U.S. venture in Iraq . . . debasing Islam and humiliating Arabs . . . turning even more ordinary Iraqis against the occupation." (p. 28). She uses his story to discuss cultural narratives about military power, sexual abuse, and U.S. foreign policy in Iraq.

People use images and cultural narratives in many ways to construct understandings about the world, to advance arguments that support a logic about their place in society, and to inform the ways we think, act, dress, speak, or imagine ourselves as "people like us." These are real issues for art educators as we consider the power of images as cultural texts circulating in society.

Rush Limbaugh constructed another cultural story that he used on his national radio talk show to challenge the human rights logic and change the rhetoric about the abuses. "Rush Limbaugh told his audience last week that the whole thing reminded him of a 'Skull and Bones initiation.' He argued that the torturers should be cut a little slack: 'You ever heard of emotional release? You heard of [a] need to blow some steam off?'" (Alter, p. 31.) Alter comments, "Limbaugh's peculiar rationalization didn't get traction, but he's right about one thing: when it comes to pictures, context still counts" (Alter, 2004, p.31). Alter argues most of the prisoners were not terrorists but civilians resisting an occupying army. While Limbaugh's story was not well received, his cultural narrative still carries considerable weight in the cultural sea of ideas since his radio show is broadcast in most markets in the U.S. Limbaugh made an intertextual articulation by comparing the Abu Ghraib photographs to the "Skull and Bones" initiation, which is a secret society at Yale (to which President Bush and Senator Kerry belonged) in which men lie in a coffin and confess their sexual secrets.

Intertextual Articulation- How do people link images with cultural narratives?

Intertextual articulation is another tool that teachers may use to help students investigate meaning and realize their own thought patterns. *Intertextual* refers to linking one cultural text such as a photograph with other texts such as novels, music, movies, television shows, toys, games, or personal experiences. *Articulation* refers to particular interpretations made while connecting these texts. Stuart Hall (1986/1996) describes *articulation* as the connection between two different elements that are suggested under certain conditions. Hall has written:

It is a linkage, which is not necessarily determined, absolute and essential for all time. . . Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements came, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (Hall, 1986/1996, p.144)

Teachers may ask students to probe their memories to see if they associate, or link, a particular image with other things they have seen or experienced. This helps students to realize that prior experiences often unconsciously influence them to interpret new experiences. After the association is made, students should scrutinizing why they made the connections, the messages they have learned, and the possible consequences.

My “Intertextual” Connections and Art Work

I experienced the images from Abu Ghraib through my eyes, mind, and body and made “intertextual” connections. First, I remembered the human rights trips I took to El Salvador and Nicaragua in 1983; to the Philippines in 1986; and, to South Africa and Namibia in

1992. I recalled people describing the atrocities they had suffered and seeing their wounds. I saw photographs of death squad victims at the Human Rights Watch sponsored by the Catholic Church in El Salvador. I remembered the secret torture manual that was produced by the United States CIA and used by the U.S.-sponsored "Contras," who were former guards of the Nicaraguan dictator, to perform violent acts in Nicaragua in the 1980s. I remembered a refugee who was protected by my church in 1983, who had been trained by the death squads in El Salvador and escaped to tell his story. His superiors, and other soldiers in Latin America, were trained in the United States at the School of the Americas in Columbus, Georgia to commit acts of torture during interrogation in their countries.

Because torture is not an abstract concept to me, the Abu Ghraib prison photographs seemed very powerful and real. As I researched and wrote this article, I first experienced the images very physically, through my body, as if I were present for the telling of the event by the victims. Next, I concentrated on the spectacle as it unfolded- watching the Senate hearing and trying to understand what happened and how the arguments were constructed. Then I immersed myself in reading about the event and I started piecing together the events historically. After that, I experienced a sense of detachment. I was able to remove myself and see these photographs as evidence of the "codes of representations" and "cultural narratives." I could feel myself relying on my mind to abstractly understand the circumstances surrounding the photographs, rather than seeing them as the embodiment of human experience. Finally, I saw them as mediated through all my experiences as individual human experiences and through my research as important visual culture artifacts used to articulate complex meanings and power relationships internationally.



Figure 3. Collage, *September 15, 2001*, Nancy Pauly, 2001.

To better illustrate how I have translated a similar experience into a creative work that I recommend below for students to do, I have included a collage that I did on September 15, 2001, four days after the attack on the New York Trade Center and Pentagon. As I reflected on

my thoughts and emotions during that week, I cut out images and texts that appealed to me and juxtaposed different elements. At the time I was hopeful that the attack would help Americans to sympathize with the families of the victims, empathize with other victims of terror, and lead to new international compassion and understanding. Instead, I saw evidence of repressive measures against Arab Americans and calls to avenge the attacks by bombing Afghanistan and Iraq. As I worked, the face of a dark veiled woman emerged. She looked up-hopeful. The words "politics, morality, and repression" appeared in the middle of an advertisement for high heel shoes. To me the shoes signify female conformity to society's standards - by contorting the foot and changing the natural balance of the body. I thought of those black shoes as the restrictive military boots of our times. I felt we were being asked to fall in step with these times, through the rhetoric of morality, to join the call for revenge and repression of civil liberties.

Examining Images with Students

In the following pages I discuss why it is important to discuss violent or sensational images with students. I also make suggestions for teachers about questions they could ask regarding images and art making experiences that could follow that discussion. The following research suggests that if images and narratives in popular culture go unchallenged, students consider them to be normal, "the way it is," promoting a possibility that these acts might be enacted toward them, or by them, in their lives.

Steyer (2002) documents the responses of young people to violent media. He writes that "[m]ore than a thousand scientific studies have shown that over time, exposure to violence in the media results in desensitization, fear, and increased aggression" (Steyer, p.16). Violence-saturated media can teach that "violence is an acceptable way to deal with conflict . . .and can desensitize them toward the use of violence in the real world" (p. 72). For example, one study (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walker,

& Huesmann, 1977) conducted with boys between the age of eight and eighteen found “[t]he more TV violence a boy watched at the age of eight, the more aggressive his behavior would be—not only at age eight but ten years later, at eighteen” (Steyer, 2002 p. 77). In a report by the U.S. Surgeon General (2000) the number of violent acts by high school seniors has climbed by 50% and assaults by young people have jumped nearly 70% since 1983, which corresponds to the time when violent television programming was allowed under President Ronald Reagan’s deregulation policy for children’s television (Steyer, 2002, p. 94) and other changes in social programs offered to the poor.

William Dodsden, superintendent of the school district in Pearl, Mississippi, where two girls lost their lives, said, “Somehow . . . we are not getting across to young people, that life is not a movie. There *are* consequences” (Steyer, 2002, p. 95). These statistics and stories suggest that teachers should discuss visual images that record violent acts with their students and give them ways to channel their feelings through art making.

Recommendations for Discussion and Art Making

Teachers might ask students a range of questions, such as the following, to engage students in discussion about any contemporary image based on the theories discussed in this article. I have translated those concepts into questions that I believe secondary students would understand.

1. *Denotation - codes of representation*: What do you see in the picture? What subject matter or design features do you recognize?

2. *Connotation - symbolic or cultural meanings based on the juxtaposition of elements*: What do the things in the picture “suggest by what they show and how they show it” (Barrett, 2003, p.11)? In other words, what meanings do these images or design qualities suggest to you? Why?

3. Intertextual Articulation- Connections between the image and other experiences: Do the things in the picture remind you of other pictures you have seen or things you have experienced in places, books, movies, video games, television, or stores? Explain. When you compare this image to those other experiences, do they influence you to think about this image in certain ways? Does this image remind you of any fears, desires, or fantasies?

4. Empathy/ Subjectivity: Do you personally identify with the people or parts of the image? Explain. How would you feel if the people in this picture were related to you? What messages does this image suggest about relationships between people? How would you feel if you were in the position of another person, one who doesn't remind you of yourself? Explain.

5. Encoding - Producing the image: Who made this image? From what perspective did he or she take the photograph? Do you think the image-maker is an insider or an outsider to this experience? What values or ideas do you think influenced the producer to make this image? Can anyone suggest another explanation?

6. Socio-historical Context- What was going on in the world at the time when this photograph was taken? What social, economic, political, or cultural situations existed that might influence your understanding of this photograph? What ideas, feelings, or actions does this image support or challenge?

7. Cultural Narratives: Do you see evidence of cultural stories that have been told for many years in this photograph about gender, racism, class, sexuality, military power, or domination of some people over other people or resources? Could someone else tell another story about this photograph to use it in another way to support another purpose? Does this image suggest consequences or choices to you?

8. Possible Social Consequences and Response-Ability: How might this image influence people to think, feel, act, or imagine future

possibilities for themselves or others? Does this image influence you to respond to ideas or messages in your art or life?

Suggestions for Making Art

1. Find images and texts from magazines and newspaper articles to which you respond because of the personal importance of the issue, graphic appeal, or your desire for an object or a person. Journal about why you selected these items. Challenge your motives. Cut, tear, or photocopy the images for use in a collage or assemblage. Find other human-made objects or natural forms that seem related to your purpose.

2. Juxtapose the images with other images and texts. Reflect on the associations that these words and images suggest from your experiences or other "cultural texts" such as books, movies, games, songs, art, or television, and write about those reflections.

3. View artwork by artists who have used collage, assemblage or an assortment of images in their work in response to historical events or personal issues such as Ester Hernandez, David Avalos, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Robert Rauchenberg, Hannah Hoch, Romare Bearden, Keith Haring, Richard Hamilton, Charleen Teeters, Eddie Chambers, and Barbara Kruger. Research how they used collage or assemblage to express their feelings, ideas, or beliefs.

4. Clarify your ideas for your own art work. Make or search for other images that would help you to make connections and strengthen the content or design.

5. Continue with an intuitive and reflective process as you juxtapose images and texts in the creation of a work. Decide on the background, middle ground and top images in layers before gluing or setting the images in place.

6. Once the images are secure, add paint, words, or objects that support or challenge the meanings of the images and words you have already selected.

7. Reflect and share what you have created with others and listen to their views.

Conclusion

This article aims to explore the multiple ways that teachers and students might investigate, analyze and interpret images in the mass media and visual culture, such as the images photographed at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003. I explored ways that teachers might use key concepts such as: representation, power/knowledge/truth, image, cultural narratives, and intertextual articulation as tools for discussions with students. Next, I explored my own way to thinking about the implications of the Abu Ghraib photographs and a collage I created. Finally, I suggested questions teachers might use to explore images from visual culture perspectives and recommended an artistic process for making creative work using images in popular media culture.

No image has an essential identity, meaning, or truth in itself. Rather images are employed and interpreted within historically - constructed social discourses. The meanings that people have constructed for images have depended on the *social conditions* under which they are produced and used; the *responses* of people who encounter them; the *cultural narratives* that producers and users employ to construct their sense of reality; and the *social power* needed to give one set of meanings precedence over others. These are significant issues for art educators as we consider the power of images as cultural texts circulating in society and the meanings students may construct from them.

References

- Alter, J. (2004). The pictures the world sees. *Newsweek*. New York: Newsweek, Inc. May 17, 2004. CXLIII (20), 31.
- Barthes, R. (1977). Rhetoric of the image. *Image, music, text*. (pp. 32-51) New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barrett, T. (2003). Interpreting visual culture. *Art Education*. Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association. 56(2), 6-12.
- Boiheim, H. (1996). *The Ad and the ego* (video). San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel.
- Cowell, A. (2004). Bush's words do little to ease horror at prison deeds. *The New York Times*. New York: New York Times. May 7, 2004. CLIII (52,842), A10.
- Dao, J. (2004). From picture of pride to symbol of abuse. *The New York Times*. New York: New York Times CLIII (52,842), A1 and A11.
- Dubord, G. (1967/1994). *The Society of spectacle*. N.Y.: Zone.
- Duncum, Paul (2001). Visual culture: Developments, definitions, and directions for art education. *Studies in Art Education*. Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association. 42(2), 101-112.
- Ewen, S. (1988/1999). *All consuming images: The politics of style in contemporary culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester.
- Freedman, J. & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc.
- Garoian, C. & Gaudelius, Y. (2004). The spectacle of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association. 45(4), 298-312.
- Glauber, B. (2004). 1st court-martial set in abuse of Iraqi inmates. *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago, Ill: Chicago Tribune. May 10, 2004. 157(131), 1 and 9.

Hall, S. (1986/96). Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. In (1996) *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. pp. 411-440. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. (1993). "Encoding, decoding." In *The Cultural studies reader*. Simon During, ed. New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. In *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. pp.13-74. Stuart Hall, ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hersh, S. (2004a). *Chain of command*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Hersh, Seymour. (2004b). Chain of command. *The New Yorker Magazine*. New York: The New Yorker Magazine. May, 17, 2004. LXXX(12), 38-43.

Hersh, S. (2004c). The gray zone. *The New Yorker Magazine*. New York: *The New Yorker Magazine*. May, 24, 2004. LXXX(12), 38-44.

hooks, b. (1996). *Reel to real: Race, sex and class at the movies*. New York: Routledge.

Jhally, S. (1987). *The codes of advertising: fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kilbourne, Jean (1987/2000). *Killing us softly: advertising images of women*. [Videorecording] Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge Documentary Films. (c. 2000) Northhampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.

Lefkowitz, M.M., Eron, L.D., Walder, L.D., & Huesmann, L.R. (1977). *Growing up to be violent*. New York: Pergamon.

Lyotard, J. (1993). *The Postmodern explained*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

McGeary, J. (2004). The scandal's growing stain. *Time*. New York: Time Inc. May 17, 2004. Vol. 163, No.20, 26-34.

Mirzoeff, N., ed. (1998). *Visual culture reader*. New York: Routledge.

Mitchell, WJT. (1997). What do pictures want? In *In visible touch: Modernism and masculinity*. Terry Smith, ed., Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. pp. 215-232.

New York Times Chronology, (2004) *New York Times*. New York: New York Times. May 7, 2004. CLIII (52,842), A10.

Surgeon General, United States Government (2000). *Executive summary, "Youth violence: A Report of the Surgeon General"*. Washington, DC: Dept. of Health and Human Services. <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence>

Schmitt, E. (2004) Abuses at prison tied to officers in intelligence. *New York Times*. New York: The New York Times Company. August 26. CLIII. (52, 953), A1 and A10

Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L. (2001). *Practices of looking: an introduction to visual culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Steyer, J. (2002). *The other parent*. N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Tavin, K. (2001). Swimming up-stream in the jean pool: Developing a pedagogy toward critical citizenship in visual culture. *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*. Edmonton, Alberta: Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, no. 21, 129-158.

Thomas, E. (2004). No good defense. *Newsweek*. New York: Newsweek, Inc. May 17, 2004. CXLIII (20), 24-30.

Wallis, C. (2004). Why did they do it? *Time*. New York: Time, Inc. May 17, 2004. 163(20), 38-42.

Williams, Kristian. (2004). When journalists call for self-censorship: Prominent pundits say CBS should have spiked the Abu Ghraib photos. *Extra!* New York City: FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting). July/ August 2004.

Williams, Raymond (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.