



## Learning to Feel What We See: Critical Aesthetics and “Difficult Knowledge” in an Age of War

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*In a post-traumatic century, a century that has survived unthinkable historical catastrophes, is there anything that we have learned or that we should learn about education that we did not know before?*

Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, p.1.

*In both production and enjoyed perception of works of art, knowledge is transformed; it becomes something more than knowledge because it is merged with non-intellectual elements to form an experience worthwhile as an experience.*

John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, p. 290.

### Introduction

Educators, students, and citizens are continually bombarded with visual imagery of social injustice, from textbook lynching photos of bygone eras to the never ending replaying of falling debris from the twin towers on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Students and educators alike muddle through difficult classroom experiences with social injustices often resisting, rejecting, and neglecting the needed criticality to seek understanding (Britzman, 1991; Britzman, 2000a). Outside the classroom, today’s visual culture lulls citizens to sleep with tragedy, and fosters a deep sense of powerlessness in the face of so much disorder. There is no need to repeat how anesthetizing and desensitizing today’s visual culture has become. However, little has been said of the pedagogical possibilities that exist when imagery of war and terror are mediated by critical discourse in the post-9/11 world. This inquiry seeks to tease out difficult aesthetic moments and highlight the political nature of such moments and pedagogical possibilities that exist within such moments.

Given today’s 24-hour news cycles, the incessant imagery of carnage, the mainstreaming of pornography, and mass desensitization to violence, educators must look anew at the impact such a cultural and media environment has on student identity and their ability to interpret and make intelligible the world around them. In the pages ahead, I investigate how the democratic sensibilities of students have been educated or mis-educated as a result of living in an environment increasingly defined by spectacles of terror and horror. Citizens of all ages bear witness to the chaos of a post-modern world that tends to offer, at times, only fragmentation and dissolution, rather than continuity and purposefulness. In this context, educators should consider the potential educative power of such a world, and construct a curriculum that meets the political and aesthetic challenges of today’s visual environment.

### **Stumbling Around in the Dark: A Critical Classroom Experience**

It was the fall of 2008, and America was on the verge of electing its first African-American president—Barack Obama. The semester was marked by a unique energy, attention, and hope in both my students and me. Armed with nothing more than an idea to visit an art gallery near campus, I set out for my evening class entitled *EPFE 201: Education as an Agent of Change*. We arrived at the gallery to view a politically charged exhibition by Chicano artist Malaquias Montoya. Montoya's (2008) exhibit is entitled *Globalization and War—The Aftermath*, and featured brutal and moving images of the abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib and the impact globalization has on immigrants and those caught in the vortex of the “war on terror.” Montoya's images utilize expressive line and color, along with written text to convey his message.

The images are emotional and engaging, begging to be the impetus for critical thought. Few left the exhibition that night without being moved by Montoya's work that called into question American actions around the world as well as our self-assigned moral superiority. Simply put, Montoya's work is that of protest. As my class entered each room, the show's curator requested that one of my students read an artist's statement. We were to stand in silence and listen as a group. The deliberate group viewing of each work made it impossible to look away or gloss over the intent of the artist, or to view Montoya's art from an isolated individual perspective. Each statement described war and globalization as a human endeavor with human consequences, rather than as mechanical acts of strategic necessity carried out without consequence.

When we returned to the classroom, students were visibly upset and disgruntled by what they had just witnessed. Many were quiet, but others vocalized their anger. I asked them what they thought of the artwork and many responded defensively: “If he doesn't like America he should go back to where he came from!” “Is he an illegal immigrant?” “Was he born in America?” Questions regarding the artists' legitimacy and integrity echoed throughout the room. Some students questioned his patriotism, and asked if he even had the legal right to impose such images on them. For many, the underlying sentiment was—“who the hell does he think he is?” I was a bit taken back at the immediate dismissal and hostility many students exhibited toward voices of dissent, what Deborah Britzman (1998) characterizes as a “passion for ignorance” (p. 89). Finally, a female student raised her hand and quietly asked, “Are those images based on real events?”

At first, I didn't grasp her question. I paused and said, “Yes, they are real. They are pictures of Abu Ghraib.” She looked at me as if she had never heard of Abu Ghraib. Scanning the faces of the other students, many had little to no reaction. I asked for a show of hands: “How many of you have seen the photos of Abu Ghraib?” A few hands went up in a class of thirty undergraduates. I was shocked—and I am still shocked by this. How could they not know about the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the continuing debate over the use of torture by the U.S. military? I told my students they could, at the time, view the hundreds of real Abu Ghraib photos available at salon.com.

One student, who was openly hostile and vocally opposed to the artwork, jumped on her iphone and found the images of American soldiers torturing detainees. I will never forget the disturbed and confused expression on her face. She quickly raised her hand and asked, “Are these bodies real?” “Why are they doing this?” “Why are they smiling?” “Why do they have their thumbs up?” “Are those people alive?” What was once a disgruntled student opposed to critical analysis of difficult social phenomenon, was now an energized, positively confused student who was thirsty to understand and to know.

Since this experience I have been curious to understand what was occurring within those students as their deeply held assumptions and presuppositions fell away and they were moved by a new desire to know. I suspect that my students had somehow encountered images of Abu Ghraib prior to the fall of 2008, whether they were conscious of these encounters is the real question. How could these notorious images escape the attention of young Americans? While students may have fleetingly seen the Abu Ghraib photos, they certainly did not *feel* in a sensuous way—they had not “experienced”—the Abu Ghraib images prior to viewing Montoya’s subversive artwork. The resulting experience of contradictory emotions, followed by an intense desire to know, combined to create a much different level of engagement in the classroom.

Danto (2006) argues that artwork surrounding Abu Ghraib, “establish[es] a visceral sense of identification with the victims” (para. 4). Furthermore, Moler (2008) describes this phenomenon embodied in the artwork surrounding Abu Ghraib as, “a sense of identification that neither the photographs nor the debate on the photographs succeeded in establishing” (pp. 36-37). The momentary identification for my students clearly had a transformative power that appeared as a sudden empathy that was previously lacking. Consequently, many were now open to considering the important role Montoya was playing in the political culture of a democracy. Over the course of that evening, my students talked themselves into the realization that dissent and protest were civic duties rather than unpatriotic acts. The resulting dialogue was both political and aesthetic, but ultimately engaged my students in the moral and ethical dimensions of war and social critique. Since leaving class that evening, I have been moved to understand the educational potential that is contained within these particular moments. For me, this “space” symbolizes the possibility in education that critical aesthetic pedagogy can be a vehicle to transform students’ consciousness and their democratic sensibilities.

### **Toward a Theoretical Analysis of Critical Aesthetic Pedagogy**

This classroom experience speaks to the growing body of theory and philosophical inquiry that explores the role of critical aesthetics in democratic education. I will utilize three critical conceptual lenses to frame my analysis: first, Britzman’s concept of “difficult knowledge” and its impact on teacher candidates in particular; second, Freire’s concept of “conscientization” in critical pedagogy, and the role of critical theory as a transformative social project; and, third, Dewey’s theory of what constitutes an educative experience and his application of this idea to the realm of aesthetics. These frameworks all share similar epistemological sensibilities, and typically seek social justice oriented ends, both individually and collectively, through transformative educational experiences.

#### **Difficult Knowledge**

Deborah Britzman puts forth a theory of knowledge that must find a more prominent place in teacher education given the contradictory (often tragic) realities of contemporary lived experiences. Her theory illuminates the powerful internal struggles that resist learning to teach, as difficult knowledge demands a shattering of self—one’s lovely knowledge of the world—to make way for the construction of something not yet defined. Britzman reminds educators to consider what is not learned, what is lost, and how individuals must learn to make, and remake, meaning through resistance and fractures between the psyche and the city. Learning to teach re-

quires the abandonment of certain long held beliefs that occur at both the conscious and unconscious levels. Nothing about this endeavor is comfortable.

When faced with difficult knowledge, many respond with anxieties, defensiveness, or a silent “putting up with” only to quickly discard all disequilibrium when the experience has ceased. In the case of teacher education, in particular, how often do authentic spaces exist to sort out this myriad of emotions that occur both in the content and the process of learning to teach? Britzman (2000b) argues that teacher education has yet to “grapple with a theory of knowledge that can analyze fractures, profound social violence, decisions of disregard, and how from such devastations, psychological significance can be made” (p. 200). What happens to the teacher candidate who learns to see the world more honestly? The students in my classroom viewed images of war, torture, and social agony—they witnessed an alternative, critical, and difficult set of visuals.<sup>1</sup> Not only did students witness the pain of the other, but the trauma of being witness to a history they did not recognize as their own.

Difficult knowledge may not only pull one away from emotional comfort, but it pulls one away from the known and definable. Britzman (2000a) places difficult knowledge in the affective realm—a “borderline” between thought and emotion:

Something in between the fault lines that suture thought, and yet something that also threatens thought from within. The threat has something to do with the speculation that while affect is a statement of need, its force is prior to its representation. We feel before we know, and this uncertainty allows affect its strange movement: Affect must wander aimlessly; it arrives too soon; it is too encrypted with other scenes to count upon understanding. The affect that may propel identifications is subject to this flaw in that, without knowledge, identification can only depend upon the urge to make familiar what is, after all, outside the range of understanding (p. 43).

As any teacher knows, curriculum of this kind is often met with profound silence, guilt, and defensiveness rather than understanding. Easily these educational encounters become ones of missed opportunity and futility, a sort of curricular trauma. Britzman (2000a) agrees, arguing “what makes trauma traumatic is the incapacity to respond adequately, accompanied by the feelings of profound hopelessness and loss, and a sense that no other person or group will intervene” (p. 43). Again, the individual potentially *feels* the difficult knowledge, but continues to repress such knowledge.

Britzman’s analysis builds upon Adorno’s (1971/1998) seminal piece, *Education after Auschwitz*. Adorno sets education against barbarism, a mode of being, and speaks to the inadequate responses exhibited by both the individual and society to such atrocities as the Holocaust. In many ways, the Holocaust, as curricular content, is already known and neatly compartmentalized in the psyche of many students due to multiple exposures to the content in both school and society. American education’s embracing of Holocaust education reflects the ease with which we support the critique of others when predicated on consensus, but lack a robust self-critique of American actions in war. Of course, to compare the Holocaust to Abu Ghraib is not my intent: the magnitude of the Holocaust sets it forever apart from other human rights violations. Howev-

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<sup>1</sup> The students in my classroom described previously consisted of pre-service teacher candidates and non-teacher candidates earning general education credit; from freshman to seniors, traditional to non-traditional aged students.

er, both acts speak to similar core issues, pathologies, and systemic failures in societies predicated on fear and terror.

My inquiry suggests that as difficult knowledge approaches the current lived experiences (time and space) of the students, the degree of felt trauma and inadequacy increases. The inadequacy appears to be part lack of information, and part confusion and mistrust of official narratives offered to provide needed information. For example, whereas students might exhibit immediate disgust at the actions taken during the Holocaust, are students willing to engage the Abu Ghraib prison scandal with the same criticality and adherence to human rights? My students were asked to read Riverbend's (2005) *Baghdad Burning* as well as attend the art gallery exhibition. The text was met with polite conversation and some intrigue, but nothing rose to the same level of engagement as the artwork and subsequent photographs. In utilizing Britzman's "difficult knowledge," I argue that education must embrace aesthetic, rather than anesthetic, educational experiences to address such epistemological challenges, and struggle against the discomforts of self-critique—especially in what appears to be a permanent state of war. Unfortunately, current educational practice at all levels is more reflective of an anesthetic, or banking, epistemology—one that numbs students into conformity and obedience.

### Critical Theory, Pedagogy, and Consciousness

Critical theory and critical pedagogy as theoretical and philosophical traditions find an obvious home in my classroom experience. Critical theory and pedagogy, although wide in preoccupations, in particular seek to articulate how education, schooling, or society in general might be responsible for the creation of human tragedies. Theodor Adorno (1971/1998) argues, "the inability to relate to others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred" (p. 120). As applied to my classroom, critical theory helps theorize how images of war, as a public pedagogy, problematize established truths, and provoke democratic sensibilities. Arguably, my former students experienced a symbolic death of "America the beautiful" as a meaningful narrative in their engagement with Montoya's images. As a result, they began to critically engage the contradictory dimensions of American civic identity. This may represent the first step needed in the long journey to understanding others—critique as a means to *understand*, rather than as the road to overly simple moral judgments.

Marcuse (1969) argues in *An Essay on Liberation* that the critical analysis of society toward revolutionary ends rests upon three categories: moral, political, and aesthetic. Marcuse's (1969) analysis of the aesthetic dimension's role to this end deserves extended quotation:

The aesthetic dimension can serve as a sort of gauge for a free society. A universe of human relationships no longer mediated by the market, no longer based on competitive exploitation or terror, demands a sensitivity freed from the repressive satisfactions of the unfree societies; a sensitivity receptive to forms and modes of reality which thus far have been projected only by the aesthetic imagination. For the aesthetic needs have their own social content; they are the claims of the human organism, mind and body, for a dimension of fulfillment which can be created only in the struggle against the institutions which, by their very functioning, deny and violate these claims (pp. 27-28).

The passage illustrates the powerful potential that lies in the aesthetic realm for shaping civic sensibilities and the struggle to overcome alienation. The “radical social content” of the aesthetic can serve to disrupt and call into question the status quo and the entrenched images of truth which sustain it. Marcuse (1969, 2007a, 2000b, 2000c) employs a dialectical approach to his description of the aesthetic, by which he describes a dynamic relationship between the individual and society within the aesthetic realm. Art, in particular, forces the viewer to see society through new compositions and juxtapositions. These new perspectives allow one to consider and reconsider what is known and what is possible.

Marcuse formulates the outlines of a new sensibility that in his view must take hold and shape the citizen in service to a world that has yet to come. The promise of liberation demands a redefining of these worn-out categories of the moral, political, and aesthetic. To redefine what has come to be assumed or a given, one must engage in the democratic dispositions of critical reflection and imagination, both of which are at the core of my project. Marcuse (1969, 2007a, 2000b, 2000c) describes the imagination as a site where sense data can be transformed, thus, the promise of freedom exists in the human faculty of imagination rather than the ability to reason.

Beyond critical theory’s musing of theory, this tradition calls on education and teachers to bring this type of analysis into the classroom. Critical pedagogy stands as a radical departure from traditional methods of instruction. The theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy are found in the seminal work of Paulo Freire. Freire’s (1970, 1974) work defines critical pedagogy as a critical analysis of society and is deeply indebted to constructivist theory, critical theory, and Marxist analysis. In particular, Freire’s theory of “conscientization” provides what I believe to be the basis for his educational conceptions. Conscientization is defined as, “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Freire appears to borrow from Marx’s theories of class consciousness and alienation, and seeks to overcome the resulting oppressive nature of reality through critical pedagogy (Fromm, 1975/2005).

Within the confines of critical pedagogy, learning to see more accurately is fundamental to gaining a critical consciousness of others and the world. Learning to be critical of one’s experience is the central aim of critical pedagogy as well as other critical schools of thought. Horkheimer (2002) describes critical theory’s central task as that of, “throwing the light of consciousness” upon what is taken for granted and accepted as the status quo (p. 257). This process of potential emancipation is “aimed at transforming society,” through the praxis<sup>2</sup> of each individual to become an actor committed to the transformation of an oppressive reality (Sherrat, 2006, pp. 198-199). Clearly, critical pedagogy becomes an expression of how critical theory can move into practice to achieve its moral, political, and aesthetic ends.

Beyond the intellectual foundation of Freire’s work, his notion of critical consciousness is necessary so that an individual can move away from a naïve, or magical, consciousness exemplified by over simplified schemas to make sense of experience (Freire, 1974, p. 15). Giroux (2007) describes critical consciousness as a process where “common sense no longer speaks for itself, but becomes subjected to a critical interrogation” (p. 153). Along with the work of Giroux, West (2000) emphasizes that critical consciousness seeks social change by unmasking false consciousness, what West terms as “sleep walking” (p. 170). Furthermore, the theoretical combination of critical consciousness and critical pedagogy offers a foundation to explore the theoretical proposition that critical aesthetic moments can profoundly shape the democratic civic identity formation of students.

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<sup>2</sup> Freire (1970) defines praxis as, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p.36).

## Aesthetics & Dewey's Educative Experience

Philosophers have taken up the question of art throughout history. Philosophy of art has traditionally been preoccupied with the study of beauty or the beautiful. The first philosopher to use the term “aesthetic” is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762). Baumgarten immediately sets aesthetics against logic in his definition, “*things known* are to be known by the superior faculty as the object of logic; *things perceived* are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object of the science of perception, or aesthetic” (Aschenbrenner & Holther, 1954, p. 78). More recently, Eisner (2002) theorizes the aesthetic in relation to its opposite, the anesthetic; thus, the aesthetic “heightens feeling” rather than creates numbness (p. 81). Simply put, aesthetics can be defined as the study of perception that is felt as a result of being engaged with an art object. However, little has been theorized concerning the possibility that aesthetics might be experienced with a non-beautiful, non-art object. For example, what is the affect of the evening news, or in the case of my students, photos, images, and abstract representations of Abu Ghraib? Further development of aesthetics defined as the study of one’s perception of objects, both concrete and abstract, allows for alternative conceptions of what “the good” and “the beautiful” represent in today’s pluralistic world.

The age old phrase, “art for art’s sake,” born out of the 17<sup>th</sup> century art tradition (and named “Aestheticism”) tends to depoliticize and strip art of its social relevancy and impact. Bell (1913), philosopher of art, echoes this belief:

To appreciate a work of art we need to bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activities...for a moment we are shut off from human interests (p. 25).

Unfortunately, aesthetics has been devalued today because of its inferior placement below logic and reason. Beyond the characterization of aesthetics and art as detached from social concerns, the power of art throughout history has rarely been denied. From the use and abuse of aesthetics and art in Nazi Germany to the current debate over the bombardment of violent imagery in the media, it is clear that aesthetics and art can transform how we imagine the world (Giroux, 2004; Sontag, 2003).

Returning to the issue of “the beautiful,” the value of de-centering the beautiful in modern, pragmatist, and postmodern aesthetic theory, weds social change to aesthetics in offering citizens new ways of perceiving. The most iconic example of this is Picasso’s *Guernica* depicting the real-world events of the bombing of Guernica, Spain in 1937. *Guernica* has come to symbolize anti-war protest art. It does this by connecting one’s emotional perception of social injustices to the development of a democratic civic identity empathetic to others (Eisenman, 2007, p. 24). In this sense, aesthetics can become a vehicle for resistance and protest. Rich (2006) agrees, and defines aesthetics in this vein: “We can also define the ‘aesthetic’...as news of an awareness, a resistance...art reaching into us for what’s still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched” (para. 6). This characterization of aesthetics as offering a portal into new forms of desire and imagination, resistance, protest, and transformation, speaks to the vital function that aesthetics can play in the formation of American democratic civic identity.

Aesthetic theory offers another vehicle for understanding the impact of art known as “the aesthetic experience.” This concept privileges the alleged transformational affect on the viewer

who witnesses a beautiful object. Kant (1790/2007) argues the witnessing and perception of the beautiful is what constitutes an aesthetic experience, an experience that bypasses cognition and affects the viewer within their sensual faculties (pp. 45-53). Theorists have long questioned the existence of such experiences, the type of stimuli that produce them, and the benefits of such an experience (Shusterman, 1997). However, the postmodern paradigm and the dissolution of classical notions of beauty, art, and truth, necessitate a reconceptualization of what constitutes an aesthetic experience (Freedman, 2003; Slone & Simon, 2009). If aesthetic experiences are transformational, or potentially liberatory, then educators must consider the critical aesthetic moments that arise from the range of images reflected in today's visual culture. In particular, images of social injustice, while not "beautiful" in the traditional sense, can result in an emotional discomfort that can act as the impetus for critical thought and action. While not denying the importance of conventional notions of the beautiful, contemporary lived experience suggests that an aesthetic experience should not be reduced to beauty alone.

Dewey (1934) ended his long career discussing the power of aesthetics and the concept of aesthetic experience in *Art as Experience*. Dewey's theory rests on the belief that all of life should be considered for its aesthetic qualities, and not just that of high art that inhabits museums and galleries. It seems that Dewey's aesthetic theory has deep affinities with his theory of educative experience (Dewey, 1938). If we apply Dewey's insights to today's contemporary context, the question arises: how has the imagery coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan been aesthetically educative? In many ways, the imagery has been violently mis-educative (Dewey, 1934). Whereas the imagery of Vietnam saturated the evening news, the imagery of current American conflicts has been sporadic and disjointed, easily censored, or interrupted by other news stories offering more catastrophic visuals and just plain trivia (from hurricane Katrina to the Super bowl). Dewey (1934) describes the importance of aesthetics in providing intelligibility to a world that may appear out of control: "tangled scenes of life are made more intelligible in esthetic experience" (p. 302).

Dewey's (1938) conceptualization of what educative and mis-educative experiences entail sheds light on his aesthetic theory: "Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness" (p. 25). As an educator, I am often alarmed at the callousness many of my students exhibit, and the frequency with which they express these sentiments in the classroom. Indeed, much of what passes for "educational experiences" today may in fact be mis-educative in the Deweyan sense. Dewey (1938) describes the problematic nature of educative experiences, foreshadowing what has become of all too many students today: "Experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another...a person becomes scatter-brained" (p. 26). For Dewey, one cannot have an aesthetic experience when the world feels out of control or chaotic. A world of "mere flux" is incapable of producing aesthetic experiences that result in individuals being transformed or moved to transform the world they inhabit. Herein lays an important educational question: might citizens today be moved to transform the world as a result of viewing the tragic images of Abu Ghraib; or, do these images pass before us and result in feelings of disconnection and powerlessness?

## Engaging Discomforting Visual Culture in an Age of War—A Plea

From the images of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal to the video game *Call of Duty*, from dusty sand colored uniforms crouching behind a city wall to the jarring image of an improvised explosive device going off to start the evening news, what are the affects of such imagery in a democratic society? Discomforting visual culture disrupts and yet often cements one's "lovely knowledge"<sup>3</sup> of American identity when left in isolated fragments (Heybach & Sheffield, 2011). I argue the transformation of "lovely knowledge" into "difficult knowledge" will unlikely happen as individual citizens experience the world from their television, computer, or ipad. An analysis of war-laden visual culture, in classrooms rather than from the couch, can force us to ask difficult epistemological questions regarding humanity. So, why are such experiences so scarce in American education?

To ground the use of discomforting "visual culture," some distinctions are needed to situate my use of the term. Stuart Hall (1997) defines culture as,

Not so much a set of things—novels and paintings or TV programming or comics—[rather] a process, a set of practices. Primarily culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings—the "giving and taking of meaning"—between the members of a society or group...Thus culture depends on it participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and "making sense" of the world, in broadly similar ways (p. 2).

If we transfer Hall's understanding to the visual world, clearly the complexity and difficulty of understanding the visual world in these terms becomes the work of today's postmodern researcher. This new visual "culture" has become an ever-complex web of meaning negotiations that must be carefully unraveled by those committed to transforming the postmodern world into one that is less paralyzing and more empowering.

Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius (2008) explore the difficult problems faced by visual culture in the wake of Abu Ghraib and America's current armed conflicts in their book *Spectacle Pedagogy*. Garoian and Gaudelius describe the current visual culture:

A disparate yet all-at-once-ness concerning the television images...mass mediated culture constitutes a dynamic, ever-expanding collage of historical and contemporary representations whose interstitial spaces are haunted by the specter of institutional knowledge, commodity fetishism, and government intervention, a condition of corporate capitalism (p. 8).

Today's visual climate, particularly as explained in the above description, exposes American citizens to a dizzying and disjointed amount of imagery that echoes Dewey's description of mis-educative experiences. If student resistance is any indicator, I find it safe to say that today's visual world is deeply mis-educative and potentially harmful to one's ability to critically discern the dehumanizing and corporate messages that bombard one on a daily (if not hourly or even momentary) basis (Giroux, 2004, 2006). Furthermore, the perpetual onslaught of images and narra-

<sup>3</sup> Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) use the term "lovely knowledge" to describe one's knowledge that often goes unquestioned and is characterized more by belief rather than knowledge. "Difficult knowledge is what one makes from the ruins of one's lovely knowledge" (p. 766).

tion reduce America's emotional tolerance for critique at a time when critique is increasingly necessary—in times of war.

Whereas this visual culture reality may leave some feeling that censorship is the only way out of such a mess: rid the world of these manipulating and confusing images that distort reality and lull us into a terrorizing sleep. Yet, censorship is hardly the friend of democratic education; rather, might educators consider what role we can play by asking the needed questions and deciphering the signs of such a complex world, and providing educative experiences—aesthetic experiences—in a time when so much is at stake? I believe so.

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