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Abstract

Photography, War, and the Ethics of Spectatorship—A Low-Stakes Activity

This assignment is designed for use in English 101, which is a beginning-level course required for all students at LaGuardia Community College. The core competency deposit for this course is Integrative Learning, although this particular assignment does not address the Integrative competency directly. It does however foster the course and competency goal of drawing out “Connections Between and Among Academic Disciplines.” The assignment involved some previous scaffolding of reading and writing activities that will support the students’ ability to put texts into conversation. The actual implementation of the assignment, however, occurs over one two-hour class period. Completion of the assignment factors into the students’ overall participation contract grade. I staged a version of the assignment with the Meanings of War seminar itself, and thus I was able to make revisions based on participants’ responses. Overall, the seminar’s focus on questions of war and torture in particular has been stimulating and productive.

Photography, War, and the Ethics of Spectatorship

NEH Meanings of War Assignment Submission

Course: ENG101

Low Stakes Activity

Due: End of class

Length: 350+ words

Requirements: Summarize and use quotations from both of the articles

Overview

In this unit, we have been thinking about how various texts address the ethics of spectatorship. Those texts have included W.H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts," Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man*, and an excerpt from Susan Sontag's book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

In this low-stakes writing activity, we will put Sontag's writing in conversation with the article we read for today, Dora Apel's "Torture Culture," about the production and reception of torture photographs from Abu Ghraib.

Apel suggests that the circulation of the Abu Ghraib photographs has spurred activism against torture and unlawful imprisonment. However, Apel also notes that the exhibition of such photographs "may raise the question for some of whether such exhibitions make the photographs available once again to a gaze of mastery, reinforcing their humiliating effect" (99-100). Apel thus presents two sides of the problem: On the one hand, exhibiting the photographs may spur political activism against torture. On the other hand, viewing the photographs may further the torture inflicted on the detainees by extending the audience for their humiliation.

For today's in-class writing, I want you to return to Sontag's essay and argue which side of Apel's argument she would place herself on. Does she believe photographs of suffering are effective agents of change? Or does she believe the viewing of such photographs to be a more ethically compromised activity? Pay particular attention to the paragraphs beginning "And it is not necessarily better to be moved..." and "Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence..."

Writing Requirements: Provide a summary of both Apel's and Sontag's texts, and include a quote from each article, using proper author tags, explication, and MLA citation style. Your writing should contain a clear thesis in which you state which side of Apel's argument Sontag would support and why.