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9-26-2014

Arts of War: Reconsidering Conflict through Interdisciplinary Artistic Collaboration

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Arts of War: Reconsidering Conflict through Interdisciplinary Artistic Collaboration

Abstract

CORE 160: Introduction to the Arts is required as part of the core curriculum at Dordt College and is team taught every semester by four professors who each address a different art form: Music, Theatre, Film, and Visual Art. Semesters are divided in half, and students select two art forms for special attention. Additionally, all students meet in two mass sections in which the team of professors address topics spanning all the arts. These mass sections are an opportunity to demonstrate for students that interdisciplinary collaboration around a given topic often produces remarkable insight.

Last year, in recognition of the 10-year anniversary of the US led invasion of Iraq, our team of arts professors took up the topic of war. Acknowledging that most of our students had effectively come of age continually seeing images and hearing news connected to war in the Middle East, we asked if the arts could help them develop more nuanced perspectives and challenge accepted understandings.

Dedicating four mass sessions to this topic, we began with Jason Bullard's quasi-religious prints of military heroes aside paintings by Steve Mumford, who traveled with the 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit. We then asked students what art works by Hanaa Malallah, Malina Suliman, and Wafaa Bilal could teach us about the cost of war from the perspective of those who try to live with the threat of violence. We continued this discussion of perspective by considering *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, a realistic video game which situates the player in a Middle Eastern conflict, and concluded with Jim Sheridan's 2009 film *Brothers*.

My presentation summarizes these mass meetings of CORE 160 in 2013 (our collaborative process in planning them, topics covered, and student responses) as well as the class CORE 160 itself as a productive venue for interdisciplinary artistic research.

Keywords

war, visual arts, film, music, theatre, pedagogy, general education program, interdisciplinary, Dordt College

Disciplines

Christianity | Curriculum and Instruction | Education

Comments

Paper presented at the "8th Verge Conference" held at the School of the Arts, Media + Culture on the campus of Trinity Western University in Langley, BC, Canada, September 25-26, 2014.

The Arts of War: Reconsidering Conflict through Interdisciplinary Artistic Collaboration

Last year, in recognition of the 10-year anniversary of the US led invasion of Iraq, a group of arts professors at Dordt College took up the topic of war in a team-taught “introduction to the arts” class. Acknowledging that most of our students had effectively come of age continually seeing images and hearing news connected to war in the Middle East, my colleagues and I asked our students if the arts could help them develop more nuanced perspectives and challenge accepted understandings. My presentation today concerns this team-taught class, and specifically our sessions dedicated to the Iraq Invasion.

CORE 160: Introduction to the Arts is required as part of the core curriculum at Dordt College and is team taught every semester by four professors who each address a different art form: I teach the music subsections, Prof. Josiah Wallace takes Theatre, Dr. Bob DeSmith takes Film, and Prof. Matt Drissell teaches Visual Art. Semesters are divided in half, and students select two art forms for special attention. Additionally, all students meet in two mass sections in which all four professors address topics spanning all the arts, at the start of the semester and at its midpoint. These mass sections are an opportunity to demonstrate for students that interdisciplinary collaboration around a given topic often produces remarkable insight.

We dedicated one of these mass sessions to addressing artistic depiction of and creative engagement with war, and we started with photo images taken on March 20, 2003, as the invasion of Iraq began. (In fact, the class met on March 20, 2013—exactly 10 years later.) Prof. Drissell presented some striking statistics: In Operation Iraqi Freedom alone, there have been over 4,400 US military casualties and over 31,000 military personnel wounded in action. Of course, these numbers do not account for the many deaths among Iraqi militants and civilians, or the results of military action in nearby countries, such as Afghanistan.

After sharing this prefatory material, students were asked to discuss with their neighbor what value it might be for us to take up the conflict in Iraq in a course about the arts. “Have you not heard and seen enough already?” Student responses were reserved, but after some strategic pulling, they acknowledged that art could offer the chance for reconsidering the conflict in Iraq. In fact, we concluded that art could potentially serve as a way for someone to reexamine the war, and perhaps see and hear with new eyes and ears.

Prof. Drissell then turned to the artwork of Jason Bullard. Bullard, an artist based in Elk Ridge, Utah, uses digital art and photography to create quasi-religious prints of military heroes. For example, *The Guardian*, *The Rescue*, and *Armed with Valor*. After showing these images, Prof. Drissell asked our students what their reaction was to these prints. What do they say about war? What do they imply about the war in Iraq? To this question, student responses were divided. Some students thought the prints were moving while others thought they drifted close to propaganda. Matt moved on to some works by Steve Mumford, an American artist who toured with the 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit.

Since 2003, Mumford has traveled periodically to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay and created unflinching depictions of the behind-the-scenes workings of war as well as the results of war. For example, *The Accused*, *Dying Insurgent*, *Going Back In*, and *Empire*. Emphasizing that Mumford’s intention was to capture the reality of war in his art, we asked students to contrast his pieces with Bullard’s prints: How do the artworks of Bullard and Mumford help us understand the war in Iraq in different ways? Some students pointed to the comfort that Bullard’s works might provide veterans wanting confirmation that their sacrifices and service had an end that was good and noble. On the other hand, some students asserted that we need to also see war through Mumford’s eyes, because war is very often not beautiful.

The class then considered what art by someone not from North America could teach us. For example, *US Modern Flag* by Hanaa Malallah uses what she calls a “Ruin Technique” in which she purposefully destroys materials in the creation of her pieces. Malallah, an artist from Baghdad, though recently in exile in the UK, has said, “My work is about catastrophe. I am soaked in catastrophe like a sponge. I am stamped by Iraq's wars. During the Iran/Iraq war I was 20. There has been war after war.” In her interactive piece, *Ineffective Game I*, viewers may move game bits at will, but, in the end, it is obvious that there are no winners and the face of the piece is increasingly marred.

Our class also considered pieces and installations by Malina Suliman and Wafaa Bilal as further demonstration that seeking out and engaging the perspectives of those who try to live with the threat of violence provides us with something valuable, an insider’s perspective.

With so many perspectives to choose from, our students were assigned the following essay: “Choose one or more of the art works discussed in class and, based on your experience and knowledge, explain how well the piece(s) depict the wars in Afghanistan and/or Iraq. Then discuss how well the piece(s) help us understand and respond to the war. How does it help?”

My colleagues and I divided these essays between us, and we all noted separately that the quality of these submitted essays was unprecedented, in terms of the work we sometimes must grade. In this instance, student writing was passionate and direct, and their engagement with modern artists was in large measure, completely sincere.

For the next massed class period, two days later, Prof. Josiah Wallace described Margulies’ 2009 play, *Time Stands Still* and recruited some theatre majors to act out a few scenes. In this Tony-nominated play, Sarah, a photo journalist returns home from Iraq. She had originally gone there with her reporter boyfriend, James, but he had returned to the US before her. While in Iraq, Sarah was injured by a roadside bomb which then forced her return. The

play takes up complicated issues such as the moral responsibility of journalists to search out and share information and pictures of tragedies, even though this means sometimes standing, apparently inactive and unconcerned while the tragedy happens. Through the course of the play, Sarah wrestles with the fact that her success is founded on the sorrows of other people, and she wonders if she is, in the end, “a ghoul with a camera.”

For example, in the following scene Sarah is showing some footage to her editor, Richard, who thinks the shots are good enough for a book. Richard’s girlfriend, Mandy, is shocked by one of the pictures, and Sarah asks:

Sarah: Which one?

Mandy: The mother crying over her child? Are those burns?

Sarah: Yeah.

Mandy: Is he dead?

Sarah: Not yet. He was in shock. He died a few minutes later.

Richard: Great shot.

Sarah: Thanks.

Mandy (Appalled; to Richard): How can you be so...?

Richard: What?

Mandy: That poor little boy! Maybe if she took him to the hospital instead of taking his picture...

Sarah: Rescue workers were there for that.

Mandy: But how could you just stand there?

Sarah: I wasn’t just standing there.

Mandy: The boy was dying! He was dying!

Sarah: The boy would have died no matter what I did. And I wouldn’t have gotten the picture.

Mandy: You could have been helping them.

Sarah: I was helping them; I was taking their picture.

Mandy: How is that helping them?

Sarah: By gathering evidence. To show the world. If it weren’t for people like me...the ones with the cameras...Who would know? Who would care?

For the third and last massed-class period, the hour was split between me and Dr. Bob DeSmith. Bob led a discussion on the narrative in Jim Sheridan’s 2009 film, *Brothers*, and I took up music heard in that film. As preparation, students were asked to watch the entire movie before coming to class.

To summarize the plot, Sam and Tommy are two very different brothers. Sam, a marine, is a noble character and completely committed to his two daughters and his wife, Grace. Tommy, on the other hand, has just been released from prison for armed robbery, and his reintegration into his family is proving difficult. Sam returns to Afghanistan for another tour, but his helicopter crashes, and he and a companion are captured. While Sam is tortured at enemy hands, his wife, Grace, thinks that he is dead. Sam endures the torturing, though, and dreams only of returning home. Before he is eventually rescued, Sam snaps at one point and kills another prisoner under provocation; his captors threaten to kill them both if he doesn't.

Meanwhile, back home, Tommy has undergone a process of growth and restoration. He has helped Grace mourn her husband, and the two share a kiss at one point. Sam's return to his family, parallels his brother's uneasy return home at the start of the film. He exhibits the symptoms of severe post-traumatic stress disorder, bullies his children, and accuses his wife and brother of infidelity. The film climaxes in a scene where Sam pulls a gun and threatens to kill himself.

Dr. DeSmith was able to find an interview in which Sheridan, the director, explained his goals for this film:

So, I mean, family dynamics always interest me, putting the family back together, and in this movie, I wanted it to be a kind of story that despite the terrors and horror that the main character goes through, the family, in some kind of profound way, stood behind him, you know?

In subsequent discussion, Bob asked the class if Sheridan achieved his goal? Was the family a place of healing? Does the movie end in such a way that we have hope for this family? And why would Sheridan be interested in "putting the family back together" in a film about a soldier? Was the graphic realism of this film warranted? What did this film teach us? Did this film tell the truth about war and its effects in the lives of individuals and families?

For my contribution to this topic, I engaged the music heard in *Brothers*. I chose two scenes; 1) “the kiss scene” with Tommy and Grace and 2) “the gun scene” in which Sam threatens to kill himself. In the kiss scene, Tommy tells Grace about how he finally went back to the bank that he had attempted to rob and asked for forgiveness from the lady he had held at gunpoint. I played the scene, asking students to formulate a comment to share with their neighbor. **PLAY SCENE (49:35-52:45)**

I explained that what they heard is called diegetic music, music that has its source is within the narrative sphere. U2’s “Bad” was one of the band’s best known songs, and this song was, in fact, heard on the film’s trailer. It is about heroin addiction—the powerful hold that the drug can have on a person and the desire of their loved ones to see that person free from it. I then introduced the term intertextuality, that is, reading multiple texts with reciprocal implication, and I asked our students to help me parse out the intertextuality of the dialog and music in this scene.

For example, the class very quickly picked up on the redemptive elements in U2’s song.

The lyrics run:

If I could throw this lifeless lifeline to the wind
 Leave this heart of clay
 See you break, break away
 Into the night through the rain
 Through the half-light, through the flame
 If I could through myself
 Set your spirit free
 I’d lead your heart away
 See you break, break away
 Into the light, through the day
 So let it go, and so find a way

The music in this moment is a connection between Tommy and Grace as they reconsider their pasts and who they find themselves to be in this moment. The scene also marks clearly a transformation in Tommy. He sits with Grace, kisses Grace, and we mark the

end of a development process that began when he was released from prison. Emphasizing a point made earlier by my colleague, Bob, I pointed out that in this scene we hear Tommy marvel at the generosity of his former victim, who is now able to move on in life, and we observe that family is the conduit for grace in his life.

Interestingly, if the first half of the film traces Tommy's development, the second half is about Sam. Up until this point, Sam's character has been primarily static or flat. The Taliban experience has so affected him, though, that he is now in need of redemption, he is in need of grace. In "the gun scene," Sam finally erupts in anger, destroys his wife's kitchen, and attempts to kill himself.

In this scene we hear ambient music, as at many other times in the movie. For example, as in earlier scenes in which Sam is tortured, the music rises and cues us to feel fear for him. I pointed out for students the interesting intertextuality between this scene and an earlier moment in which Sam first entered the Taliban camp: both feature a high pitched Eastern instrument. Additionally people are shouting at him here in a way purposefully reminiscent of the scene in which he killed his fellow prisoner. The music reinforces, subtly and effectively, the explanation as to why Sam is in the place he is. **PLAY SCENE (1:33:24-1:34:29)**

In conclusion, I'd like to refer to an email, Bob sent to our entire class before we began this mass section in 2013. He explained to students that our plan was "to demonstrate how the arts are a means of learning, responding, and gaining insight" and that we would "share and discuss examples of art works that tell stories based on true events, respond to those events, and invite us to consider the significance of those events. In brief, we will suggest that the arts play a powerful role in helping us make sense of our world." To Bob's words I would add that the power of all the arts to engage our understanding of the world and ourselves is amplified when the arts work together, as in the CORE 160 class at Dordt College.

Finally, I must stress that, in the end, the success of these classes was the result of combined effort and expertise, and my colleagues, Dr. Bob DeSmith, Prof. Josiah Wallace, and Prof. Matt Drissell deserve appropriate recognition for their contributions.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.