

# TRACING DIMENSIONS OF AESTHETIC *CURRERE*: CRITICAL TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN PERSON, PLACE, AND ART

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In the movie “M,” filmed in 1931 in Germany two years before Hitler came to power, the director Fritz Lang examines the psychology of a serial child killer. The murderer, played by a young Peter Lorre, intentionally selects, stalks, terrorizes, and kills his weaker child victims. In the last scene, Lorrie yells out, “I have to roam the streets endlessly, always sensing that someone’s following me. It’s me! I’m shadowing myself!” (Nebenzal & Lang, 1931). The film can be read as an allegory for a country gripped by murderous national psychosis. It portrays not only the beginnings of a holocaust, but explores underlying dynamics—subconscious impulses that shadow the self.

As film, “M” offers viewers a context for critique. As a reproduction and representation of experience projected into an exhibition space, it separates itself from the fabric of its production, separating the viewer from its underlying historical meanings (Benjamin, 1986). Viewing “M,” audience members ask: how is this individual, gripped by fear and hatred of the other, motivated to murder? And, based on the allegorical meaning: how does a country, motivated to punish and incarcerate (either in prisons or deportation camps), justify national glory and war over global cooperation? While it is tempting to think that a strongman (or woman) somehow hypnotizes a sleepy electorate into a murderous mass, it is important to note that the leader does not come first; the national psychosis—the shadow—precedes the strongman (or woman), who is often democratically elected.

Decades after the outbreak of fascism in the 1930s, the world is again facing immense human suffering and turmoil. It is my contention that Curriculum Theory, acting as a counterbalance to insanity, has never been so important as in this moment in time. This essay explores one aspect of curriculum theory—the way *currere* and resistance art, mixed together, become mutually generative, creating aesthetic *currere*. This exploration is motivated by “the urgency of now,” by an awareness of this moment of heightened xenophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia—against a global backdrop of a growth of fascism and neoliberalism.

In this paper, I first show and discuss one example of resistance art. I then sketch some of the contours of aesthetic *currere* within Curriculum Theory. Next, I present an example of aesthetic *currere* from my own practice. Finally, I conclude by discussing and critiquing aesthetic *currere* in relation to Curriculum Theory.

## RESISTANCE ART

Resistance art asks viewers to deconstruct both the normative political context of the art, as well as their own positionality (and self-accountability) in relation to it. An example of this dynamic, critical process may be found in an examination of the photography of the feminist artist Lalla Essaydi. In her original home of North Africa, she poses contemporary women to resemble women who had been enslaved in harems only a couple of generations earlier. In her photographs, women lie softly and silently on luxurious rugs. In one picture, a woman has a robe covering the midsection of her body. The robe is decorated with a yellow-and-blue tile pattern. This pattern matches the tile of the floor she is lying on, blending the two patterns together. And, brilliantly, Essaydi has

added calligraphy to her images, tracing fine Arabic writing along the porcelain contours of the supine body. The calligraphy does not color beyond the outline of her skin. It is on her hands, forearms, face, back, calves, and ankles, but not on her ears, lips, or hair. The bottom of her feet are caked in mud.

As I examine Essaydi's art, I'm struck by the model's neutral vulnerability: she lives but resembles deeply inscribed marble, so detached is she from her surroundings. To me, this text-inscribed image does two things. It, first of all, frames and decontextualizes the Western emphasis on the use of language of interpretation (Rao, 2015). Although subtle, this subtext between language and image then creates a destabilizing dialogue. Second, the calligraphy, written on the body, inscribes the body with written messages. These scripts are literally embodied on the model. Essaydi's art calls on the viewer to critique both Western and Middle Eastern society's abundant foundation of a normative epistemology of colonialism and then to situate oneself into that critique (Rao, 2015).

Resistance art shows the varied role that positionality plays in the interpretation and meaning of art. It evokes, in the words of Janet Miller (2011), the "ethics of self-accountability." What is loving to some is outrage to others and—through dialogic disruption—the genesis of introspection and a deeper view of humanity for all. As Prikryl (2010) notes, "The way a photograph lops off a slice of reality, severing it from the narrative flow of time, is a seductive thing: it acts like a little hammer to the reflex in our brain that wants to tell stories" (p. 29). In this restorying process, art promotes the "subversive imagination" (Becker, 1994) of the participant, shifting understanding for that person to a new key.

### AESTHETIC *CURRERE*

In my reading of *currere* (Pinar, 1975, 1994, 2012), *currere* is life-history curriculum with which people (e.g., teachers, students) engage in an embodied deconstruction of the past to reconstruct the future through wide-awake study in the present. In this analytic/synthetic dynamic, the concept of narrative discontinuity plays a central role. This discontinuity is a break with a routinized way of perception, an individual epistemology grounded in cultural and historical genealogies. The issue is not simply that these genealogies are methods of cultural inscription; rather, it is the nature of their inscription. Within a culture deeply rooted in colonialism and bigotry, these traditions come to frame our perceptions and actions, often unknowingly, which we displace in our interactions onto both broad structures (e.g., the election of politicians seeking to either maintain or change bigotry) and daily life (the promotion of an inclusive and democratic curriculum or of a normative and exclusive curriculum).

Going further than resistance art in the promotion of a transformative process, *currere* has been demonstrated to provide what I maintain is an existential platform for movement from an original state to a qualitatively different state (see Sameshima & Irwin, 2008; Sawyer & Norris, 2013; and Slattery, 2016 for arts-based examples of *currere*). As Maxine Greene (1991) notes, existential change comes about first through a conscious dialogic "disordering" in making a choice that involves a risk of "coming in touch with themselves, of creating themselves" (p. 10). Making such a choice, an individual faces a tension between exercising personal agency and/or being shaped by historical, regulatory discourses (Foucault, 1990).

Applying Foucault's theory of the archeology of knowledge to the concept of *currere* helps to clarify the nature of *currere*'s autobiographic, transconceptual, and transtemporal ruptures and re-syntheses. Foucault (1972) discusses the critical importance of examining not historical continuities (an examination grounded in and supportive of normative discourses), but discontinuities. To focus on discontinuity is

to examine the breaks in our epistemological insights and epiphanies—the way history unfolds not as a continuous narrative, but as a discontinuous one—and, thus, how thought changes, as opposed to remaining the same—through history. Left unexamined, our sedimentary perceptions of the past guide inscribed narratives that frame the present and then prepare us for a continuous future: lack of awareness of the past does not leave one in a state of quiet equilibrium, but like the lead character in “M,” in a state of festering possibility. As Greene (1991) states, “. . . it is always easier to fall back into indifference, into mere conformity, if not into bad faith” (p. 10).

However, as life curriculum for praxis, *currere* is challenging and requires an embodied post-modern fusion—not bifurcation—of theory and practice. Embodied curriculum, grounded in life history, animates this process of praxis. An embodied curriculum is organic and lived, generated collectively by students and teachers, and unites mind and body. Ted Aoki (1993) thought that a lived curriculum “is not the curriculum as laid out in a plan, but a plan more or less lived out” (p. 287). Drawing from Deleuze and Parnet (1987), Aoki (1993) describes the relationship between the embodied curriculum and the multiplicity of identity. He reminds us that identity is not a preexisting presence—existing in an *a priori* state before a situation begins—but rather one that comes into being in classroom transactions, the “in-dwelling” between students and the teacher.

The call for legitimation of curriculum-as-lived, then, is a call to recognize that textured site of lived tension—so often ambiguous, uncertain, and difficult—and a call for struggle in tension but nevertheless a generative site of possibilities and hope. (Aoki, 1999, p. 180)

This is “a tensioned space of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty but simultaneously a vibrant site. It looks like a simple oppositional binary space, but it is not. It is a space of doubling. . .” (Aoki, 1999, p. 180).

These dialogic spaces of multiplicity emerge as third spaces as people culturally translate their and other people’s stories of experience (Bhabha 1990; Sawyer, Neel, & Coulter, 2016). Bhabha (1990) discusses third spaces as:

. . .the act of cultural translation. . .[which] denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture. . .[with]in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. (p. 211)

In third space theory, subjectivity is bracketed in, not out:

[In] a third space. . .both parts of a conflicting (cultural, gendered classed, national or psychic) double interact with and transform each other so that multiplicity of the self gives rise to a new realm of subjectivity in new areas of negotiation. (Wang, 2006, pp. 120-121)

Aoki references Gadamer (1975) to clarify the intersubjectivity of self in relation to other: “[It is] one that intertwines the self as subject and the other as subjectivity—an intersubjectivity, which, in the hermeneutic language of Hans Georg Gadamer understands it as a fusion of horizons, an intersubjectivity interfused into a ‘we’” (Aoki, 1993, p. 265). It is the “improvised line of movement growing from the middle of. . .

conversation” (Aoki, 1993, p. 268). This movement, generates heteroglossia, a multi-voiced and critical tension (Bakhtin, 1981), creating new possibilities within a dialogic imagination.

*Currere* itself is double-coded, intertwining both theory and practice, method and framework, rupture and fusion. Allegory within *currere* operates as a form of doubling as an overlay of two situations, becoming a qualitatively different third. Allegories are openings into deeper meaning and lie at the core of *currere*. With my own explicit work with *currere* in collaborative autoethnography (e.g., Sawyer & Norris, 2013), the aspect of *currere* that is most challenging is one’s attempt to revisit and engage the past in a lived way (Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010). To resist the simple re-inscription of current biases by way of a safely uncomfortable glance into the past, one has to engage in a deep reading of one’s earlier experience—almost in a Freudian sense—in order to surface the root metaphors of our lived lives, the archeology of our beliefs. For subjects to begin to engage their past more deeply, especially in more horrific aspects of historical and contemporary life, the development of an imaginative capacity is necessary. This is the capacity within deeper subjective ways of engaging the past as a context for the generation of new ways of perceiving the present and imagining the future.

The historian Manning Marable (2007) reminds us of the difficult but necessary challenge to gain the capacity to be able to reimagine horrific aspects of our past to start to gain a healthy conceptualization of the future:

The process of frank reevaluation of a shared past of suffering and struggle may prompt a rededication to enduring democratic values and policies, which will bring at long last all elements of our fragmented nation into a common civic project. (p. xxi)

Marable (2007) clarifies that “the darkest aspects of American history have often been hidden from plain view because of the power of the past—or at least the power of the popularly perceived past—to shape the realities of our daily lives” (p. 3).

While meaningful engagement of the past is challenging, art can play a role of creating more allegorical or metaphoric readings of one’s life. Similar to having a dream that dislodges our complacency and raises long suppressed meanings, allegory has a way of creating a new lens, a new text overlaying an older one. Pinar (2012) likens this process to the literary concept of “palimpsest”:

The present has been historically conceived, and so it is in the past we begin to seek the meaning of the present and our way to the future. It is the past that can dislodge from submersion in the present, and its articulation can serve as an allegory-of-the-present. No longer a flat line between what is no more and can never be, the present becomes a palimpsest. In such a temporally structured, subjectively animated curriculum the classroom becomes, simultaneously, a civic square and a room of one’s own. (p. 47)

Pinar is suggesting that allegory, as a “palimpsest,” is a site of multiple codings, erasures, and eruptions of new meaning.

Allegories are double coded readings of events because the initial event is not a direct parallel of the second event. Rather, these events are distorted mirrors of each other, and the reading of each is mutually enlightening and problematizing. In allegory, a description of or reference to one situation comes to represent to some extent a second situation. As Pinar (2012) mentions:

When we speak allegorically we do not do so for the sake of a future in which such information will, we imagine, become usable. Rather, we self-reflexively articulate what is at hand, reactivating the past so as to render the present, including ourselves, intelligible. (p. 50)

Bringing the past into the present by way of allegory creates a “creative tension” and, when mixed with an aesthetic embodied curriculum, has the promise to deepen one’s engagement with root metaphors. Allegory provides a frame for how we do, or do not, shape this phenomenological site.

While it is possible to describe allegory, it can operate beyond language and offer a source for emotion and imagination. This can be a source of “mythopoesis,” a personal-and-cultural imaginal negotiation (Bradbeer, 1998). These imaginal sources “address the idea of Yin—the response of the heart to the world, our subtle receptions to our raptures and hurts; and our play with the sense of our ‘dim sources’” (Bradbeer, 1998, p. 7). These non-verbal and often destabilizing imaginal sources provide an opening to experiencing life-history curriculum in a new key.

**IN A CURRICULUM THEORY CLASS:  
AN ILLUSTRATION OF AESTHETIC CURRERE**

In 2011 in Palestine, I sought to take a picture of the graffiti on the cement containment wall that cuts through the heart of Bethlehem. A second before I shot the picture, a Palestinian boy jumped into the frame, disrupting the intended picture.

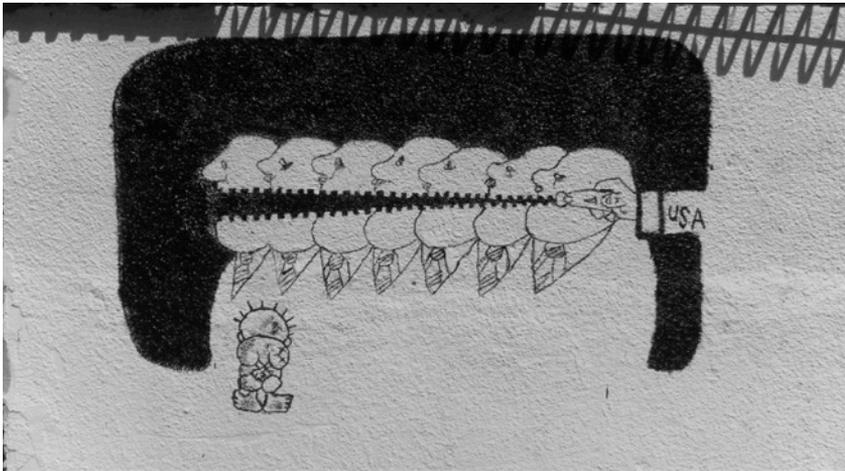


As I interpret the photo, the boy clutches his stomach as if in pain, sticks his tongue at me as the source of his pain, and looks me straight in the eye. I sought to photograph a safely contained outrage, carefully framed and multi-language protests of the Palestinian

genocide. Instead, a young man disrupted my pictorial composition and my personal narrative. Disobedient art shocks our imagination. It creates dialogic spaces in which we may disrupt contained narratives of entrenched complacency and safe progressivism—the worn clichés and careful slogans—by which we lead our lives. For me, the photo shows how the work of art itself may be disobedient, unpredictable, and unstable, leading the creative process.

Close to the wall where the boy stood in the above photo, I walked down the dusty alleys of Aida, the smallest of the three refugee camps in the biblical town of Bethlehem. Aida, clean and crowded, has an organic, haphazard look. Fine alleys twist through white buildings stacked on other white buildings. Around sharp turns you see detailed black-and-red graffiti painted on the sides of the houses.

I now ask you to look closely at the following image, which was on a wall in the main alley.



As you examine this image, try to do a couple of things. First, try to imagine your responses to it. What are they? Now, go back into early images of your life and reimagine the genesis of your responses. Where do they come from? How are they situated within your childhood experiences? How is your own story linked to these responses? How do your responses reflect your parents' and even grandparents' responses? That is, try to decipher where they come from. Pretend that you are a social archeologist and you are doing an archeological dig on their formation.

If I mention that the graffiti image that we just examined was created by another artist years earlier and copied by the graffiti artists from a projected stencil, does that information, which is true, alter or add to your response in anyway? How so?

At first, when I examine this image, I feel a little defensive. This is a picture of how the United States manipulates different politicians, who look similar, but are probably from different countries. I tell myself that this is the artist's perception of this situation. Why do I do that? Does that imply that I want to deny the vision? I try to think of other alternatives for the disembodied arm's manipulation of the politicians. I become aware of two different narratives: the U.S. as aggressor and the U.S. as democracy builder. I go to my childhood. How are these narratives related to myself? This image becomes an allegory for my childhood. I now do a clustering activity, where I jot down freely associated ideas about these narratives. I see that their roots run deeply from the present to the past.

I then examine the image more closely and appreciate its design: The politicians are created by negative white space, that is, they are not directly colored, but are delineated by surrounding black border. The hand is also in negative space. Brilliant, while at the same time cartoon like. The zipper/teeth are double-coded. I try to stifle a sense of disappointment that the image is a copy and not an original. Who is the little figure with his back toward us? It's an odd image with strange hair.

We now go back to my class where I show a video I made of Omar, the graffiti artist, telling us in English the story of the image:



*Here, there are a lot of different kinds of drawings on the wall. All the drawings are by the same artist. His name is Naji al-Ali. He was assassinated in London. And he drew social political...things dedicated to the Palestinian struggle and the Palestine resistance. He was against the international imperialism in the world, and he was speaking about how the state—how they have the power to control the world. And in this drawing he means how these people represent the different states in the world and how the hand is the United States and how they are controlling their own mouths.*

The video shows us standing in front of the “zippered mouth.” We are startled as police officers in a Palestinian patrol car come cruising carefully down the narrow alley and then stop within inches of us. The police officers appear more interested in a social visit than a political or legal one. They smile and resume driving slowly down the street. Omar continues with his discussion:

*And the art by Naji al-Ali, focuses on the refugee living outside Palestine...to push Palestinian refugees to struggle to come back to our land, to Palestine. Also, he was against the power states in the world...who control the world. And this is the meaning, and everybody can explain the art differently, but this is the meaning of the art, the meaning of how the world is controlled and controlled by some people and by some groups.*

I go back to my response and I have a new allegory. I take Omar’s words and try to map them onto my childhood, and I can’t. I begin instead to use them as an allegorical frame for my analysis of my childhood, comparing my life with those Omar describes.

My white privilege, even in the most unpleasant moments of my childhood, is glaring. I see my progressive views are within a safe U.S. narrative. I am left with a deep sense of shame, underscored perhaps by the exceptional generosity the Palestine people showed us (a Bedouin sharing precious coffee with us) and think about when I was tear-gassed 7,000 miles from home: the pain and fear I felt for a moment is experienced by people throughout the world on a daily basis—yet my mouth is usually zippered, or I’m the one pulling the zipper.

I show another video to the class. In the video, it is midnight and Omar and his colleagues set up a projector on a table in the alley, connected to an extension cord that hangs from a window. A crowd gathers—men, women, children of both genders and all ages, and then sit as if in an outdoor theater preparing to watch the latest release from Hollywood. They project the image against the wall. The image shows a stencil of a woman planting the Palestinian flag. Omar and the three other friends, again only men, paint over the stencil. They are wearing loose white t-shirts and the image projects against their backs, erasing any boundary between them and the painting:



As my class watches the video of Omar and his colleagues painting over the stencil of the image of the Palestinian flag, they are observing the reproduction of a work of art. They are not swept away by the patriotism of the creation of the image, but they do create a dialogue between this event and their own narratives. They dwell—within the confines of a classroom—in this between-space of creative tension. This is a tension that encourages them to deconstruct their positionality in relation to patriotism. Patriotism itself is a topic with deeply tangled roots in the history of the American psyche (Huckabee & Weinburg, 2012). Patriotism in the United States appears to be shifting from a fear of foreign countries as threats to a hatred of foreigners within the country, a transformation that has morphed onto the festered eruption of other hatreds, such as that toward supporters of Black Lives Matter, environmentalists, and progressives in general (Cohen, 2017). In fact, it seems as if internal racism in the U.S. now trumps our response to outside countries. One wonders what the response of the far right to the hacking of the U.S. election by the Russians might have been had that hacking been coordinated by China or an African country.

This surfacing of positionality evokes the words of Pinar (2012):

Curriculum theory asks you...to consider your positionality as engaged with yourself and your students and colleagues in the construction of a public sphere, a public sphere not yet born, a future that cannot be discerned in or perhaps even thought from, the present. (p. 47)

In his famous essay written right before the outbreak of WW II (and two years before committing suicide while fleeing the Nazis), Walter Benjamin wrote about forms of art that both reinforced normative discourses (the “aura” of a work of art) and actually destroyed such a process of socialization. He stated, “With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide” (Benjamin, 1986, p. 234). I interpret this statement to mean that film, as reproduced art, has a critical, seductive quality that builds the viewer’s reception but within a context of deconstruction. Benjamin further offers these thoughts about film:

Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage. This phenomenon is most palpable in the great historical films. (Benjamin, 1986, p. 220)

While the last short video that my class viewed was not a “great historical” film, it was a platform that asked them to deconstruct their own response and—dwelling between their lived story and now perceptions of how to re-story their narrative—to choose a new path.

Engaging in aesthetic *currere* can be an epiphany for a student. An example of such an epiphany may be found in Patrick Slattery’s (2016) example of how one of his students began to experience an initially inexplicable connection between a painting and his own life. The painting was *Lot’s Frau*, by Anselm Kiefer, an artist who fled Nazi Germany. The painting prompted him to ask his family about their history, and he learned that he had actually lost immediate family in the Holocaust, an aspect of his family history always just beyond his awareness. After entering a shadowed family history, he emerged in the present a person forever changed.

Meanings generated by art can be unstable and disobedient. While one person can interpret a work of art in an affirmative way, another person can be deeply threatened by it. These are aesthetic phenomenological moments. Our immediate attention in “real time” and the moment expands our perception from an epistemological basis to an ontological one. In my transaction with the “Zippered Mouth” and the video of the Palestinian flag, different aspects of the artistic experience intersect. There is the work itself, with the zippered mouths, the hand of the U.S., and the witnessing of the young boy—the iconic image of Handala—who has become a world symbol of Palestinian political consciousness, justice, and self-determination. Handala’s face, which the viewer never sees, is always turned toward injustice, asking the viewer of the art to enter the dialogue and take a political stand. There is the political statement by Omar in placing this image on the wall of a refugee camp (reflected in the window of the police cruiser). And there is the meaning created by the viewer of this image (that of witness, underscored by the posture of Handala). It is at the intersection of these multiple texts that old symbols and meanings are disrupted and new ones emerge. Complicating this process is the very act of inscription—the creative process by which Omar and his friends

create their stenciled graffiti. In this reinscription of the image, a new image appears as the viewer dialogues with the art. This is not art intended to make the reader feel comfortable. Rather, it is intended to raise its viewers' levels of consciousness (Freire, 1970). This conscientization focuses not only on colonialism, but, equally important, on the viewers' relationship to it. This process is not about indoctrination into a new ideology; rather, it is the opposite. It engages us in critical subjectivity and asks us to critique our positionality to ideology.

I would like to extend this critique to a discussion about my selection of Palestine for the setting of my illustration of aesthetic *currere*. For me, this topic underscores difficult conversations within Curriculum Theory. As embodied curriculum, *currere* can be a powerful context for students. Given the deeply emic nature of this experience and the political context of all curriculum (Beyer & Apple, 1988), does this experience then become a site of political indoctrination of students to my (or any) political views? I acknowledge that all curriculum has a political context. However, I did not select this example to politically indoctrinate students. This is not instrumental curriculum with a predefined end point. First, the students do not need to share their own thoughts and *currere* in class. I build on Pinar's (2012) recommendation not to do that or only to do that with great sensitivity and always with student choice. Also, in this experience, students are free to move in any direction they wish. However, I have selected the topic of Palestine intentionally as the basis for a difficult conversation. The allegory within this *currere* is not just Palestine, but rather an individual's perspective of his country and art within a powerful cultural context. This is a stark lens with which students can come to examine their own beliefs and their enculturation within those beliefs.

I think that, as educators, we have a moral obligation to acknowledge the plight of those who have been neglected and disenfranchised. Furthermore, this example, as a context for the existential notion of choice, becomes a powerful one. It elevates the meaning of choice and the role of personal responsibility behind it. In *currere* (and aesthetic *currere*), students are not just "examining" their positionality, they are living the ideas and motivations behind it. As such, they are in the process of becoming and imagining a new direction for themselves in the present and the future: animating the concept of *currere*.

To return to the movie "M" and the murderer haunted by his past, our histories shadow us. As we examine our past through the overlay of a new lens, we consider how the present becomes a palimpsest for the past and the past for the present. And, I maintain that it is within this moment of tension that a person's engagement in the making of a choice becomes underscored as the existential act that it is: our choices come to shape who and what we are within a public sphere.

## CONCLUSION

Weaving art into a process of *currere* generates many new possibilities. To go back and consider the "zippered" graffiti, the third space is created within the dialogue between the active (communicative) image and myself. Instead of propaganda, I experience a story of agency and liberation. My own negative spaces become positive ones. My interpretation enters into a complex conversation, and I am asked by Curriculum Theory to begin to reconceptualize my views into a more nuanced and layered view of the world and myself. It is an embodied space in which we "re-member" (Slattery, 2016) ourselves. Curriculum Theory underscores the value of the unique, the contingent, the transitory, the lived. As art asks us to make the common uncommon, aesthetic *currere* moves us beyond ourselves.

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