

The Power and Impotence of Images

Julian Stallabrass



Abu Ghraib, 1.53 am, 20 October 2003. Detainee is handcuffed in the nude to a bed and has a pair of panties covering his face

This is one of the torturers of Abu Ghraib, reflecting on how she is haunted by her actions:

On the rare occasion that I forget to take my medicine, I usually have nightmares. When that guy was screaming in the shower, I hear that in the middle of the night. It'll wake me up, freak me out. It's always going to be there. The way he was screaming, it was just a death scream. He was screaming at the top of his lungs constantly. And you're right in the next room. It's like it's vibrating your whole body, it's so loud. I don't think I'll ever get that out of my head.¹

There are many things that cannot be photographed, and many more that, for all kinds of reasons, are not photographed. But Lynndie England's statement, in which the trauma of another is buttressed between a consideration of her own, points to the silence and stillness of those notorious images, to all that they do not show, but which they gesture towards.

Torture (and its photographic depiction) has become central to the way in which our current wars are waged and viewed, and by extension to the very image of the neoliberal system. Torture is the central feature in Naomi Klein's examination of the system in her book, *The Shock Doctrine*. This takes head on the conservative association between

¹ Lynndie England, as cited in Philip Gourevitch/ Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story*, Picador, London 2008, p. 276.

democracy and free markets, which pretends that there is a perfect correlation between the two, so that communism and an utter lack of freedom sit at one end of the spectrum, and the untrammelled free market and perfect personal freedom at the other. What Klein shows, remorselessly and in graphic detail, is a different association—though one long familiar in the ‘developing’ world: that the imposition of free markets is so unpopular and drives so many people into penury that it can only be done against democracy, and that torture and terror are its inevitable companions.²

It seems that the association is easily forgotten. The kind of photography that galvanised the anti-war movement around the world at the time of Vietnam seems to have lost its power. While in the Vietnam era, torture (from the electrodes of the CIA cell to the graduated increase of pain that was supposed to break an entire nation) was the secret of state policy, and was revealed in part through photography; now torture is overt government policy but its effects remain often unrepresented, or when they are, they pass with little comment or effect. This essay will examine some of the reasons why.

In doing so, it will consider the changing relationships between military strategy, the conduct of war, the media, and its technology. All are intimately connected, and all have been undergoing deep transformations. To take one example, the satellite phone first became small and cheap enough to be used widely in reporting the Iraq War, and that development meshed with 24-hours news and the system of embedding reporters to produce a focus on an intense, spectacular but oddly bloodless and narrow view of the war.

The Iraq War was the most intensively reported in history, involving more than double the journalists present at the height of media interest in Vietnam. Yet it is curious, out of the resulting cascade of images that minute-by-minute filled television screens, websites and the pages of newspapers and magazines, how few seemed to stick in the mind, and to become the key images that defined the character of the war. A number of photographs had done that for the Vietnam War—notably, Eddie Adams’ 1968 photograph of the summary execution of a guerrilla suspect, Nick Ut’s 1971 photograph of a napalm-burned girl running down a road, Ron Haeberle’s photographs of the massacre at My Lai, and much of the work of Philip Jones Griffiths.

² Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Allen Lane, London 2007.



Philip Jones Griffiths, South Vietnam, Quin Hon. US Soldiers with a group of captured Vietcong suspects, 1967. © Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos.

The amateur images taken at Abu Ghraib did threaten for a time to become the signal images of the war, and they still stand as such in the Arab media. They have no difficulty in deciphering and remembering such images. Why do we?

The major military innovation of the Iraq War regarding the media was the embedding of journalists. Under this system, reporters, TV crews and photographers gained relatively unrestricted access to the war at the price of being tied to a particular troop unit. The system was devised to grant journalists largely uncensored access to military operations while strongly encouraging them to take a positive view of what they saw. Since many embedded journalists were placed in dangerous circumstances under the protection of the troops, and lived with them for extended periods, this tended to foster a strong identification with their new comrades. They were generally very grateful for the access to spectacular stories, admiring of their protectors, and appreciative of the troops' various travails.³

Yet embedded journalists were also aware of the disadvantages of this privileged view of the war, especially in being tied to particular troops units, which often had little information about the wider circumstances of the war. David Zucchino summarised his seven-week series of embeds for the *LA Times*, praising the access the embed system had granted him, but continuing:

Yet that same access could be suffocating and blinding. Often I was too close or confined to comprehend the war's broad sweep. I could not interview survivors of Iraqi civilians killed by US soldiers or speak to Iraqi fighters trying to kill

³ Many accounts of the war by embedded journalists are gathered in the interviews in Bill Katovsky/Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003.

Americans. ... I had no idea what ordinary Iraqis were experiencing. I was ignorant of Iraqi government decisions and US command strategy.⁴

The embed produced a narrow view of the war, which was focused on the experiences of the troops. Despite frequent laments of its deficiencies, it continues to dominate. Embedding fitted the demands of the news organisations in the US and the UK, for spectacular, live or at least up-to-the-minute reports, high on affect and low on analysis, and likely to stiffen patriotic sentiment.



Ashley Gilbertson, Fallujah, November 2004. Marines run past a mosque American jets destroyed after insurgents used it to attack them.

The embeds were largely uncensored—though understandably they were not allowed to report troop locations and other sensitive information that might have been of use to the Iraqi armed forces, and they were not allowed to show US casualties until their families had been informed.⁵ As the system developed, however, it turned out that soldiers at various levels evolved their own set of rules, which, in concert with the sensibilities of the mass media, produced a highly controlled and sanitised view of the war. This can be seen clearly in the contrast between the work of the embedded photojournalists and those working as ‘unilaterals’ among the Iraqis. In the latter, the experience of Iraqi civilians and resistance fighters is reflected, and the picture of the war is darker, bloodier, and more desperate. In their work, something of the systematic destruction of a deeply damaged but still functioning society can be glimpsed. The US armed forces were not fond of unilaterals, often stopped them from reporting, and were sometimes responsible for their deaths: Terry Lloyd of ITN was assassinated, and the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera was bombed in April 2003, killing their correspondent in the city.⁶

⁴ *L.A. Times*, May 2, 2003, cited in Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, p. 142.

⁵ The rules for embedding are reproduced in Bill Katovsky/ Timothy Carlson, *Embedded: The Media War in Iraq*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut 2003, pp. 401-17.

⁶ Terry Lloyd was shot in the head by US forces in Basra in 2003; in October 2006, an Oxfordshire coroner’s court ruled that he had been unlawfully killed.



Karim Kadim, Baghdad, 6 June 2004. Mohammed Saleem, 18 months, lies in a coffin at a Sadr City morgue. Relatives said the boy and four other family members were killed in their car when US forces opened fire overnight.

As the occupation continued, photography became increasingly constrained, partly because Iraq became extremely dangerous for anyone thought to have any link to the occupation, or even anyone having money or professional status, and partly because of an evolving system of censorship. In an audio blog, photojournalist Michael Kamber described the situation:

Today in Iraq there's so many things we can't photograph any more. Car bombings and suicide bombings are now off limits, it's actually illegal to photograph those scenes. We can't photograph wounded soldiers without their consent. We can't photograph dead soldiers, coffins of dead soldiers... We can't photograph battle-damaged vehicles, we can't photograph hospitals, morgues are off limits now. So pretty much everything that gives evidence that there's a war going on is almost impossible to photograph.⁷

There is, in any case, little desire among the US public to see such things, little motive for the media to show them (indeed, there is a strong disincentive, since they are poison to advertisers), and so the photographic view of the war became bloodless and anodyne.

In addition to embedding and censorship, the military mastered the photo-op, and staged many actions for the cameras. Most famously, the war opened with the 'shock and awe' assault on the Iraqi infrastructure, a bloody firework display intended to terrify the Iraqi Army into surrender, and to broadcast the extent of US military prowess to the world. Reporters, photographers and TV crews in the Palestine Hotel had a ringside view of the bombardment taking place across the river. In this, and in similar staged photo-ops, the media were co-opted as an essential part of military strategy—a 'force multiplier' in

⁷ Podcast on Battlespace project: <http://www.daylightmagazine.org/podcast/june2008> See also: <http://www.battlespaceonline.org/> Accessed 10 August 2008.

Pentagon jargon, a term also used to describe the presence of women and dogs and Abu Ghraib to, respectively, humiliate and terrify the prisoners.

The profession of photojournalism has been in long decline since the fall of the illustrated magazines that had made their best photographers stars, and had lavished resources upon them. While the decline dates back to the 1960s, and was caused by the rise of TV news, it has been exacerbated by other, newer features, including the extraordinarily wide ownership of digital cameras, particularly phone cameras, and the ease of sending photographs which has produced the rise of (usually unpaid) 'citizen-journalists'. Economically pressed news organisations often prefer to provide cameras (but little training) to willing locals rather than fly professionals out to some scene of conflict. Rates paid for the publication of newspaper photographs have fallen steeply.

Nick Davies, in his book *Flat Earth News*, argues that the news industries, and particularly the newspapers, have been remade as purely commercial concerns.⁸ While the old press barons ran them for their influence over public opinion and state policy, and thus took the quality of news seriously, profit is now the prime motive. As a result, stories are covered with remarkable rapidity, and most proceed unchecked to publication. Papers tend to reproduce with little change the material handed down from the press agencies (which are subject to the same pressures) and PR industry, including the military. As a result, it is received opinion that it is the quickest and easiest to convey, and cliché reigns. These pressures affect the context in which photojournalism is seen, its captioning and the stories that surround it. The photographs take their place in a press that has become degraded in public opinion, and is (often rightly) thought of as unreliable, gullible, mendacious and venal.

Davies argues that the fate of the news media under the profit motive is disastrous for readers and for society itself.⁹ Once again, the operation of unrestrained capitalism works against the interests of democracy. With our current wars, it allows, without sufficient public examination or debate, the exercise of brutal and totalitarian methods against those who are unfortunate enough to live in areas of strategic importance under inconvenient dictators. The US has engaged in kidnapping, murder, and torture of those it has chosen as its opponents. Gulags, some secret and some (like Guantanamo Bay) publicised, are set up across the globe. Children are seized and held to extort information from their parents.¹⁰ These are tactics worthy of the Nazi, yet they pass with inadequate comment from the democratic press, at least in the nations of the combatants, and with little published photographic representation.

⁸ Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News*, Chatto & Windus, London 2008.

⁹ Davies, *Flat Earth News*, pp. 396-7.

¹⁰ Morris & Gourevitch, *Standard Operating Procedure*, p. 115.



Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, Najaf, 9 August 2004. A fighter for the Madhi Army walks the streets of the old city.

One consequence of this debility of the press is that the Coalition's opponents are easily and casually characterised as unthinking religious fanatics, with whom the Western viewer can have little sympathy or understanding. Some of them, particularly the foreign Al Qaeda fighters, are that, and have amply proved that they have as little regard for the lives of Iraqis as they have for those of the invaders. Their actions are viewed with horror by many in the Arab world. Most of the resistance, however, are not, and as Jonathan Steele argues, their opposition to the occupation of their country emerges from a firm historical awareness of the imperial roles that the US and the UK have long played in the region, confirmed by the brutality of the invasion and the occupation.¹¹ A suitable model in thinking of them would be to compare them to the resisters to any occupying force, from the French Resistance to the Vietnamese National Liberation Front.



Anja Neidringhaus, Fallujah, 14 November 2004. A 1st Division Marine carries a good luck mascot in his backpack as his unit pushed into western neighbourhoods of Fallujah.

¹¹ Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*, I.B. Tauris, London 2008, ch. II.

Contemporary photojournalism exceeds, as it always has, the bounds its publication in the mass media, and some photographers (even some of those embedded) evolved sensitive and politically intelligent responses to the terrible situation in Iraq. It is just that we are more likely to see such pictures in exhibitions, books and websites than in major newspapers or TV channels. We may get some sense of photojournalism's place in the current variety of war photography by comparing it with other types of photography: against the stately, reserved, severely composed 'aftermath' images that dominate the depiction of war in the museum, photojournalism embodies speed and intimacy, both of which are written into its style as well as its content. Just as it was for Larry Burrows, the focus falls above all on the face, and on readable emotion. Against citizen journalism and the ghastly amateur productions of the troops (as at Abu Ghraib), photojournalism embodies professional values; while its aesthetic often encompasses the apparently casual, it bears the sheen of photographic competence, and the visual quality of high-definition digital cameras or fine film and sharp lenses. As against official military photography (which shares those same production values), it has too great a variety to be dismissed as mere propaganda, and does not so readily fall into generic categories. As against the photographs of atrocity, of the bloodied corpses of those blasted by modern weaponry that circulate in certain magazines and websites, photojournalists regularly turn their lenses away from what they know will never find mainstream publication.

Given the circumstances laid out here, it is unsurprising that widespread suspicion surrounds photojournalism. News management by the state and the military has made people rightly sceptical of the manufactured images that they see in the newspapers and on TV. The ease and speed with which digital photography can be altered (along with a few well-publicised examples of photojournalists doing just that), and awareness of the extent to which meaning can be manipulated by selective framing, produces deep distrust. In blogs, the meanings of photographs are debated passionately and often furiously, with political partisans of all sides finding reasons to dismiss any photographic evidence which challenges their views. Here, though, photojournalism is at least thought to matter.

The most fundamental factor that separates our world from that of the Vietnam era, with its effective photojournalism, is the lack of an opposition with a cogent world view, that could assemble the evidence—words, pictures and video—into a condemnation of the war that could not be ignored, that would gnaw at us and torture us as it did at many in the late 1960s. The sheer intensity of commercial competition to war imagery (from celebrity culture to YouTube to the fictional renderings of the 'war on terror' such as *24*), the speed of gossip and self-fashioning through trivia, all this make it too easy to forget that bloody subterranean murmur that should stain our whole existence.

A biennial of a few exhibitions and events is, of course, powerless to alter these large forces. It sets out to provide some resources for thinking about the range of war imagery, and the role that photojournalism plays in the media and democratic politics. For if, through the actions of our troops and allies abroad, we have come to act as torturers, and if that cannot be readily grasped through pictures, and if that does not cause a questioning of our politics, then something fundamental about our democracy is broken.