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Collective Self-Representation and the News:
Torture at Abu Ghraib

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Torture is not new, but its detailed photographic representation is shockingly, stunningly new.[1] The Abu Ghraib visual archive is a collective portrait of a group of American reservists, Military Police, enlisted soldiers, CIA personnel, and civilian contractors who, almost overnight, become jailors of Iraqis. In the span of a few months, one group of [mostly] white and [mostly] working class men and women were given life and death power over dark, mostly male foreigners, the majority of whom, needless to say, did not speak English and whose culture was altogether alien to the occupying Americans.[2] The unprecedented aspect of this phenomenon—I refer to the participants' act of collective self-representation as they tortured their prisoners—should not be underemphasized. [3]

Certainly it is of some significance that, despite the ready availability of the camera, routinely practiced tortures such as waterboarding, beating, or electrical shock have rarely if ever been photographically documented as part of the torture process itself. Whether officially sanctioned, as in the dirty wars in Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, or further back, the Algerian War of Independence, as far as is known, neither the torturers nor the observers thought to visually record, circulate, and indeed, publicize their activities.

Where some writers have made reference to photographic precedents (e.g., the lynching photographs published and exhibited in New York City at the New York Historical Society in 2004)[4] or to the concentration camp photographs that are for many the benchmark for atrocity imagery, others have looked back historically to the representation of torture in the visual arts, as represented in the prints of Jacques Callot, Francisco Goya, as well as to certain paintings by Leon Golub.[5] But this evocation of an art historical genealogy, if that is what it is, misses one of the central features of the Abu Ghraib archive; namely, its carnivalesque atmosphere, its eroticism, and its s/m trappings and staging. In this sense, the photographic record is less a "documentary" than an "entertainment," a spectacle, a kind of aggregate movie, comprising both still and moving pictures (i.e. videos) whose participants function as both directors and actors who perform their roles for one another as well as for an implied spectator. These feature particular forms of torture, imply certain forms of viewing, and involve circuits of transmission and reception that distinguish much of the imagery from Abu Ghraib from, say, the nightmarish depictions of rape, mutilation,

and carnage that Goya depicted in his *Disasters of War*, or for that matter, the photographs of lynching that have been cited as photographic precedents. But the central problem with the reference to examples taken from the visual arts is the elision of the distinction between the imaginative rendering of torture in graphic or painterly forms and the indexical properties of the photographic—even if digital—record. Which is merely to say that a photographic record is categorically different from a graphic one, even if the torture represented in graphic form "really" happened, or was "really" observed by the artist.[6]

The photographs and videos made in Abu Ghraib, from the moment of their recording, became an archive, an image repertoire. As an archive, the collective representation of the torture at Abu Ghraib circulates in the world with newly acquired meanings and significance. In the ether of cyberspace, the pictures were exchanged and circulated initially between a few dozen of the Americans posted in Iraq and, since 2004, they have circulated internationally. Interestingly, although these images were made with digital media, they prompted no challenge to their authenticity. (They have, however, remained censored; much of the image archive has never been released). But as a digital archive now available to anyone with access to the web, the archive is located nowhere in particular and everywhere that it comes into use. It is, moreover, a constantly expanding archive. These include, but are not limited to, the use of the photographs in the international media, the conscription of the imagery to political posters, art works, street theater, political cartoons, demonstrations, and other various oppositional uses.

One of the uses of the archive in the US that sparked controversy was the exhibition of certain of the images, downloaded from various websites in art venues. I refer specifically to exhibitions held at the International Center of Photography in New York City and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2004.[7] In this regard, the presentation of manifestly non-artistic pictures whose significance lay only in *what* they depicted (as well as the form of digital media itself and its modes of dissemination) sparked comment on the risks of the "aestheticization" of the imagery, or alternatively, the argument that the space of a museum (a priori defined as a space for aesthetic contemplation) had no business trafficking in such pictures in the first place. These were arguments that were made previously around the exhibition of the James Allen archive of lynching photographs, although in that instance, its first venue was the New York Historical Society, not an art museum. Putting aside the merit of either argument, the more important point here is how archives—especially digital archives—lend themselves to these plural applications, addressing different audiences, becoming variously re-signified in the process, and, in turn, generating new discourses.

Another element in the discursively generative capacity of an archive is the phenomenon of "iconization." By this term, I refer to the process by which certain images, for a variety of reasons, become generally symbolic not only of the particular event depicted, but of a larger entity or situation. In other words, the "iconic" image, such as that of the hooded detainee, precariously poised on a box, wires dangling from his limbs, became for many a synecdoche of the evil of the war itself as well as an evidentiary rebuttal to President Bush's claim that "the US does not torture." For certain commentators, such as W.J.T. Mitchell, the symbolic as well as the discursive power of this single image lay in its evocation of the crucifixion.[8] Whether such an association is what made this particular picture *the* iconic representation of torture at Abu Ghraib is less important that the scale of its diffusion. "As famous as advertising logos and brand icons like the Nike Swoosh or the Golden Arches, the image rapidly mutated into a global icon, that 'had legs,' to use the Madison Avenue expression."[9] In this particular respect, almost as soon as the Abu Ghraib pictures were released to the American media, this harrowing picture became such an icon.[10] In fact, the hooded man was reproduced on political posters in Baghdad and Teheran within days of its release, and has since become ubiquitous as an indictment of the war and the policies that accompany it.

In its various appropriations, the original meaning of the hooded detainee thus became re-signified, transformed from the American jailors' orchestration of one man's victimization to a signifier of defiance, a call for revenge, a rallying point for opposition. And because the images, however abstracted (as in many of the anti-war posters and other graphic media) were drawn originally from the photographic archive, the hooded man retains the shock of the indexical; a living, terrorized body, precariously tottering forever on its box.

The history of the public exposure of this archive is a story in itself, beginning with a single soldier's forwarding of some of the pictures to his superiors. In the following months, selections from the archive were leaked to Seymour Hersh, reporting for the *New Yorker*, and to CNN in 2004. In the wake of the efforts of the White House and the military to block the further public release of the images, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights initiated ultimately successful lawsuits in 2003.[11] Subsequently, several hundred more of previously censored images and videos were leaked to the Australian television news program "Dateline" and, almost immediately after, were acquired and reproduced by *Salon*.*com*.[12]

The pictures from Abu Ghraib will never go away. While it is possible to destroy "original" physical pictures, electronic media is forever. Like other visual evidence of American atrocities (for example, the massacre at My Lai) the proof of what went on in this war is having its effects, metastasizing globally, functioning to rally opposition, to foment hatred of the US and its policies, to give the lie to America's stories about itself and its moral and ethical exceptionalism. Although what the Abu Ghraib archive depicts is hateful, shameful, sadistic, insofar as it documents one vicious aspect of a conflict that has been subject to unprecedented visual censorship, it is finally better—necessary—to have these records of the horrors, than not.

The central question raised by the Abu Ghraib visual archive has been raised before. Has the capacity for shock or outrage that might be conceivably provoked by the photographic imagery of torture been irrevocably diminished as a consequence of repetition and familiarity? Has the almost quotidian exposure to the photographic record of carnage, cruelty, and victimization operated to numb the affective capacities of viewers? Has the mass media exploitation of simulated violence in TV, or especially film, neutralized the perception of real violence? These are among the central questions raised by Susan Sontag and several other writers addressing the meaning and significance of the Abu Ghraib archive.

In her 1977 book *On Photography* Sontag argued that it was one of the consequences of our immersion in the image world of photographic representation that we become inoculated to the horrors that photographs enable us to see.[13] In certain of the essays, Sontag continually referred to the deadening attributes of photographic imagery at least in its collective manifestations.[14] "To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize."[15]

In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag returned to the problem of photographic imagery in relation to war. The problem, as she then saw it, was that the photographic revelation of carnage, destruction, and death, brought daily into the domestic space of readers and viewers, could only be descriptive, like any other photographic document.[16] The photographic evidence of any war's destruction and human suffering, she argued, could neither analyze, explain, narrate, nor contextualize. It could not, in and of itself, prompt action, effect political beliefs, shift perceptions. "To an Israeli Jew, a photograph of a child torn apart in the attack on the Sbarro pizzeria in downtown Jerusalem is first of all a photograph of a Jewish child killed by Palestinian suicide-bomber. To a Palestinian, a photograph of a

child torn apart by a tank round in Gaza is first of all a photograph of a Palestinian child killed by Israeli ordnance."[17] But even more pointedly, Sontag observed that a century of unbearable, previously unrepresentable photographic pictures of the casualties of war, increasingly civilian, has done nothing to make warfare less frequent.

Sontag's last published essay, "Regarding the Torture of Others," remains unsurpassed in its scenographic analysis of what happened at Abu Ghraib prison.[18] As a canny anatomist of camera culture, Sontag was especially attentive to the staging of particular kinds of torture. The essay, whose tag line in the original *New York Times Magazine* format was "The Photos Are Us," stressed the generic categories to which Abu Ghraib belonged: tourist snapshot, home-made pornography. In the former instance, the perpetuators' desire to document their activities were likened to vacation snapshots, recording the subject's temporary occupancy of a foreign place, sometimes with the natives, sometimes in picturesque or recognizable settings. As such, the torture photo, like the touristic souvenir snapshot, is a kind of visual trophy. In this respect, those Abu Ghraib pictures depicting the perpetrator posed, often smiling, with the victims—corpses included—are uncannily similar to the more anodyne pictures made by (in some cases) the same individuals, such as those featuring Pfc Sabrina Hartman playing with an Iraqi child and those depicting her mugging over the battered corpse of a prisoner. As such, the torture photo, like the touristic souvenir snapshot, is a visual trophy of a part of one's life that one wishes to be made visible, preserved, and remembered.

The photos from Abu Ghraib, as Sontag concluded, far from being the productions of a deviant fringe, or as government apologists had it, "a few bad apples," were fully in keeping with a pornographic imaginary that constituted the underside of the United States' official values and ideologies and further shaped by a global camera culture based on fantasies of imaginary possession and appropriation. Although it is equally germane to note, as she did, that the actions and their documentation are equally shaped by the ideologies of militarism, and (although she did not stress this) racism and anti-Arab prejudice. If I am correct in viewing the archive as both a kind of collective home movie, and as a self-representation of a certain strata of American society—the lower functionaries of the American imperium in its militaristic incarnation—there are many reasons to reflect on Sontag's succinct analysis of the imbrication of both aspects of the events: the photographs are "representative of the fundamental corruptions of any foreign occupation and its distinctive policies which serve as a perfect recipe for the cruelties and crimes in American run prisons."[19] "The photos," as the *New York Times* glossed her essay "are us."

Notes

1 I refer to the photographs and videos made in Abu Ghraib prison and released by the media on 27 April 2004. The present essay is excerpted from a text originally published in French as "Torture à Abou Ghraib: les medias et leur dehors." *Multitudes* 1/2007 (n. 28): 211–23. Online at http://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes–2007–1-page–211.htm#citation (accessed 2 January 2013).

2 There is a substantial bibliography on the psychology and sociology of torture. But with respect to the "ordinariness" of those who abused or tortured detainees in Abu Ghraib prison, see especially John Conroy, *Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People: The Dynamics of Torture*, 1st edn. (New York: Knopf, 2000).

3 There are, of course, numerous precedents for these collective photographic portraits; soldiers, communards, and concentration camp personnel—all have produced visual documentation of their activities. But as I will argue, the pictures from Abu Ghraib are fundamentally different from their predecessors.

  4 The photographs exhibited at the New York Historical Society were drawn from the collection of James Allen and were later published in James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000). See, for example, Dora Apel, "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," *Art Journal* 54 (2005).

  5 Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London and New York: Reaktion Books, 2007).

  6 And, I would add, made by digital rather than analog cameras. For while, in theory, the digital cameras used in Abu Ghraib are by definition technically distinct from the indexical properties of analog representation, the cameras and videos were used in no way differently than analog cameras, nor, apparently, were they manipulated.

  7 A selection of the Abu Ghraib pictures was exhibited at the International Center of Photography in New York City (17 September—28 November 2004). See the thoughtful review by Eleanor Heartney, "A War and Its Images," *Art in America* 92.9 (2004): 51–53.

  8 W.J.T. Mitchell has discussed the symbolic resonance of the hooded Iraqi tricked out with wires and the reasons for its iconic status. See Mitchell, "Sacred Gestures: Images from our Holy War," *Afterimage* 34.3 (November/December 2006): 18–23.

  9 See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

  10 Debate continues about the actual identity of the hooded man. See in this respect Kate Zernicke, "Cited as Symbol of Abu Ghraib, Man Admits He Is Not in Photo," *New York Times*, 18 March 2006.

  11 These Freedom of Information Act lawsuits were first filed in October 2003, for the purpose of documenting the abuse of detainees held in US custody abroad, well before the release of the first set of images from the prison nearly seven months later. These lawsuits resulted in the release of more than 90,000 pages of government documents on issues of detainee treatment in Iraq, Afghanistan, and at the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

  12 *Salon* obtained the files and other electronic documents from one of the investigators involved with (or close to) the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID). The material, which includes more than 1,000 photographs, videos, and supporting documents from the CID may not represent all of the photographic and video evidence that pertained to that investigation. According to the Army's own accounting, the review of all the computer media submitted to this office revealed a total of 1,325 images of suspected detainee abuse, 93 video files of suspected detainee abuse, 660 images of adult pornography, 546 images of suspected dead Iraqi detainees, 29 images of soldiers in simulated sexual acts, 20 images of a soldier with a swastika drawn between his eyes, 37 images of military working dogs being used in abuse of detainees, and 125 images of questionable acts. Based on time signatures of the digital cameras used, all the photographs and videos were taken between 18 October 2003, and December 2003.

  13 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977).

  14 This argument was one of the central themes in the Situationist critique of mass media in capitalist society. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983).

  15 Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977): 20.

  16 The war that provided the immediate context for her discussion of recent war photography was the war in Bosnia.

  17 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003): 10.

  18 Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times*, 23 May 2004.

  19 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*: 17.