WORDS NOT SPENT TODAY BUY SMALLER IMAGES TOMORROW

Essays on the Present and Future of Photography

by **David Levi Strauss**

aperture

Troublesomely Bound Up with Reality

On the Aestheticization-of-Suffering Critique Today

There was a time, at the end of the 1980s, when the critique of documentary photography based on the "aestheticization of suffering" was so influential that it became virtually impossible to defend documentary practice. Any such defense was regarded as at best naïve and at worst ideologically suspect.

Then came 9/11. I have argued elsewhere that the attack on the Twin Towers, the most photographed event in history, effectively reset the clock on documentary images, clearing away years of accumulated censure.[1] The affective unreality of the event cried out for representation, and most people experienced it as an image. Photography's special capacity as a medium of mourning brought us close to it again, and made us realize how much we need public, shared images to make sense of such events. Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) was in part a recognition of this epochal shift, and it revised and updated her earlier views of photographic images and their social effects in *On Photography* (1977).[2]

Looking back on it now, those earlier critiques of photographic representation appear dated and overdetermined. Too many of the persistent questions about our complex relation to public images had been answered, as if for good. The trenchant critiques of documentary photography by Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and others were necessary corrections at the time to a great deal of muddled mystification about the nature of photographic representation, and about the real effects of public images. But over time these critiques became intellectually enshrined as definitive, and later writers and artists began to treat them as unassailable truths rather than as timely interventions. Students made operational assumptions ostensibly based on, but not always supported by, these texts, and the aestheticization-of-suffering critiques, especially, entered a period of academic mannerism.

Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain (2007), a companion volume to the exhibition of the same name held at the Williams College Museum of Art in 2006, is edited by Mark Reinhardt, a political scientist, and two art historians, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne. It includes substantial essays by the three editors, as well as by John Stomberg, deputy director and senior curator at the Williams College museum, and cultural critic and theorist Mieke Bal.[3]

As its title indicates, *Beautiful Suffering* begins with the now-conventional critiques of the aestheticization of suffering in its pursuit of "alternatives to mainstream photojournalistic ways of representing suffering," with the worthy goal of fostering "a more

reflective awareness of how we represent and address the rampant suffering and the corollary spectatorships that characterize our time." "Without scenes of death, destruction, misery, and trauma," the editors write, "the contemporary image environment would be nearly unrecognizable." And they note that since September 11, 2001, "accounts of trauma have become still more crucial to the formation of the social bond and the shaping of national identity."

In his essay, "Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique," Reinhardt cites the aestheticization-of-suffering critiques of Rosler, Sekula, and Solomon-Godeau as definitive, but registers doubt about the sufficiency of these critiques. He calls aestheticization "an overly blunt tool for getting at what is most troubling about certain photographs of suffering people," and recognizes the anxiety about such images as "an anxiety . . . of the formal choices and rhetorical conventions, and the resulting transformative work, of representation itself."

That, in a nutshell, is what ultimately makes the aestheticization critique insufficient. Yes, there are certain inherent problems with representing the pain of others, but does that mean we should no longer attempt such representations? Reinhardt generously acknowledges my work in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003) as "a significant resource" for his own thinking, but takes me to task for proceeding "too swiftly" after having "established the futility of seeking to avoid the aesthetic work of transformation." I would argue that the events of the past six years have shown that the world has moved on as well. These images are not going away, and the gap between them and the effective analysis of them is growing. In a footnote, Reinhardt notes that philosopher Susan Buck-Morss pressed him on the real sources of anxiety about images of suffering, asking: "Is there not something in images that resists or eludes every effort to fix meaning through language? Might *that* be the underlying source of anxiety?"

In his "Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary," John Stomberg concludes that "the debates surrounding contemporary photographic representations of human suffering derive, almost unaltered, from . . . polarities invented in 1938" in the debates within the Frankfurt School, and also in the conflict between the documentary approaches of Margaret Bourke-White and Walker Evans. Holly Edwards focuses on the public trajectory and multiple migrations of Steve McCurry's *Afghan Girl* image that first appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1985. In her essay "Photography after the Fact," Erina Duganne addresses the always-contested line between art and documentary by looking at the work of Luc Delahaye, Sally Mann, and Alfredo Jaar, and cites Rosler's brilliant critique of the tradition of "concerned photography" in her 1981 essay "In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," in which she accuses concerned photography of embracing "the weakest possible idea of social engagement, namely compassion." This theme is taken up by Mieke Bal in her contribution as "the problem of sentimentality." Bal's "The Pain

of Images" makes the strongest case for the enduring value of the aestheticization critique, but falls back on reductive views of the aesthetic (and of photography), attacking "the indifference of aesthetics," and calling photography "the medium so troublesomely bound up with reality." Referring to James Nachtwey's 1993 image of a starving man in Sudan, she writes: "The photograph is less obviously 'art,' although also well made to an almost troubling degree," concluding that "beauty distracts, and worse, it gives pleasure—a pleasure that is parasitical on the pain of others."

This censure of beauty in the depiction of suffering is never applied to music, and seldom to literature or painting, but often to photography. This censure contends that photographs shouldn't aestheticize their subjects, because this contaminates the real with visual pleasure. It is the performance of this contamination, the making of the image, that "troublesomely" implicates us in its foul mixture, where, as Bal writes, "the questions of empathy, sympathy, or identification—of bottomless but directionless emotion as well as the seemingly opposite question of aesthetics and its required disinterestedness—are bound up with the most obvious problem of what the exhibition's subtitle pointedly calls 'the traffic in pain.'" Why is the emotion elicited by such images "bottomless" or (necessarily) "directionless"? Is there a political efficacy to empathy? To say that compassion is only the first step in responsibility to social justice is one thing; to say that it is destructive to social engagement is quite another. One needs to first feel the pain of others before one can begin to act to alleviate it. And one of the ways humans recognize the pain of others is by seeing it, in images. This emotional attachment to images is unstable and can be manipulated, certainly, but that doesn't mean it should be disproportionately censured. Doing so moves us from the distrust of images to the fear of images, and ultimately to a counterproductive iconoclasm.

The 2007 book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* approaches this question of the social effects of public images very differently.[4] The authors, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, who come from the field of rhetoric (which they call "both a practical art and a theory of public address"), are remarkably free of the basic assumptions of the aestheticization-of-suffering discourse. They announce early on that they "take aesthetics seriously," that they consider photojournalism to be "a patently artistic form of public address," and that "the zenith of photojournalistic achievement is the iconic photograph." Challenging "the presumption that visual media categorically degrade public rationality," they approach photojournalism as "an important technology of liberal-democratic citizenship."

Taking iconic press images seriously aesthetically and politically, they proceed to examine a number of examples, including *Migrant Mother* (1936), by Dorothea Lange; *Explosion of the Hindenburg* (1936), by Sam Shere, with *Explosion of the Challenger* (1968), by NASA; *Raising the Flag on Mount Suribachi* (1945), by Joe Rosenthal, with *Three Fire Fighters Raising the American Flag at Ground Zero* (2001), by Thomas Franklin;

Times Square Kiss (1945), by Alfred Eisenstaedt; *Kent State Massacre* (1970), by John Filo; *Accidental Napalm* (1972), by Nick Ut; and *Tiananmen Square* (1989), by Stuart Franklin. Their close readings of these iconic images employ multiple strategies and tools to investigate how these images create "a public culture that lies somewhere between hegemony and resistance." Avoiding previous approaches that "produce social theory at the expense of what the images are actually doing," they look hard at the images themselves and at the way such images are used, appropriated, parodied, and celebrated.

Hariman and Lucaites recognize that talking appreciatively about icons causes "many in the academic audience to conclude we have a naïve understanding of representation," but they contend it is time for a fresh approach in a new era. "The beginning of the twenty-first century," they write, "has been a renaissance for photojournalism, one driven by events (principally 9/11) and, more significantly, by the addition of digital media." They recognize that "the study of various practices of visual representation is booming," and that this study draws on methods previously underutilized.

Their approach, though grounded in a theory of public address, is primarily practical: "We are dedicated to the critical study of public discourse and public arts on the assumption that they are crucial to the success of democracy." They want to understand "how public address fulfills the interrelated functions of constructing public identity and motivating political behavior."

Could it be that what were necessary and substantive critiques of representation in the past have become, in practical terms, hindrances to actually looking at images? And that this has contributed to an effective political passivity in the face of a rapidly changing communications environment? Hariman and Lucaites rightly point to "the larger problem identified by Peter Sloterdijk . . . that modernity has entered into a terminal phase of 'enlightened self-consciousness' whereby all forms of power have been unmasked *with no change in behavior* [emphasis added]. Irony is too widely dispersed throughout modern consciousness, subjectivity too fragmented, the administration of power too cynical, and critique too disposed to reification for unmasking to be other than a reproduction of the world it would change."

Rather than seeking to unmask "the traffic in pain," Hariman and Lucaites address public life as "a trafficking in attitudes," and they follow literary critic and theorist Kenneth Burke in defining attitudes as *incipient actions*. "Decisive action," they write, "actually is rather rare in stable societies and everyday life, but all of life is in fact defined by one's potential for action." The formation of attitudes through the propagation of words and images is a large part of life in a functioning democracy, and we devalue it at our peril. To Hariman and Lucaites, the stakes in this struggle involve the shift "from democratic to liberal norms of representation," that is, "from democracy and the *public* demands of collectivity to liberalism and the *private* needs of the individual." One of the things iconic public images do is provide a way for us to negotiate collective needs and desires.

The authors' approach is eclectic: "Both traditional conceptions of persuasive appeal and modern methods of ideology critique are needed to explicate the icon, while neither approach alone will capture how collective identity is negotiated aesthetically." In relation to the iconic photograph of the Kent State massacre in 1970, Hariman and Lucaites point to the "general suspicion or suppression of emotional display" in political life in the United States, which is part of a larger derogation of "the role of affect in the public sphere." This derogation perpetuates the shift from democracy to liberalism "by presenting emotions as if they were individual properties," exclusively. Public emotion, they say, operates enthymematically; that is, certain premises are left out, because they are taken up and completed collectively. Hariman and Lucaites go a long way toward explicating a defense of empathy as necessary to collective action. "Citizenship," they say, "is transferable from one body to the other, not by legal entitlement or any contractual relationship, but through acts of empathy, affectional identification, and emotional expression on behalf of the other."

All of which takes time. It requires slowing things down. "'Democracy, consultation, the basis of politics, requires time,'" they write, quoting French cultural theorist Paul Virilio, "while the fundamental dynamic of modern society is the *acceleration* of all modes of exchange." Hariman and Lucaites also point to a related paradox in our current communications environment: "The icon organizes public memory around a very few signal events as the exponential increases in information availability overwhelm individual processing capacity. A few dominant images can reflect either a scarcity of images or the reverse: an overabundance that has to be ignored if one is to function at all."

So, as the number of images and the speed of their transmission increase, fewer and fewer iconic images will become increasingly dominant, while the multitude of images disappears into inaccessible storage (like Bill Gates's Corbis archive secreted away in Iron Mountain). And this could lead to a very big problem: "Should public commemoration become fixated on too few images, memory calcifies around these few events while great swaths of experience are lost. Historians always will have access to other media, but the ordinary citizen living in media space is left with the equivalent of an aboriginal calendar."

And, as William S. Burroughs taught us, the most effective systems of social control in history have been calendrical. Hariman and Lucaites put it this way: "By limiting the record to icons marking major events, and by the formulaic use of the icons over time, tribal memory becomes reduced to oral narratives that increasingly follow the cues on the visual artifact. The same is happening in public memory."

The challenges of public memory and public agency are rapidly increasing as the technologies of communication change at an accelerating rate, and our ability to respond, to keep up, will depend on our willingness to find new ways of analyzing and understanding image flows. The paradox is that some of these ways are ancient, as well as nascent.

NOTES

1. David Levi Strauss, "The Highest Degree of Illusion," in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), pp. 182–85.

2. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), and *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

3. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne, eds., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Williams College Museum of Art, 2007). The citations in the following paragraphs all derive from this volume.

4. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007). The following citations all derive from this volume.

The Shutters Come Down

On the Death of Kevin Carter

When it comes to political violence, we want witnesses and demand sacrifice, and sometimes the two come together. Every day, professional witnesses get into position to show us what is happening far away and out of sight. We want to see the broken bodies and sorrowful faces of those who do not have our privileges or protections. We want to be connected to these unfortunates through images. Why? Because we feel responsible to them, and we like feeling responsible *for* them. Their suffering gives a context for our comforts, and a distant focus for our empathy.

The rules for this exchange are remarkably inflexible. We want those who take on the work of witnessing to show us things in the right order and in a certain light, within strict rules of propriety. It is permissible to tease the edges of these proprieties—in fact, we reward such flirtations with prizes—but not to be too insistent about it. An excess of truth can be a dangerous thing. Or, as T. S. Eliot had it in a poem about redemption: "human kind cannot bear very much reality."

South African photographer Kevin Carter was a committed witness who became a tragic sacrifice, and a scapegoat for our guilty desire for images of others' suffering.

Kevin Carter was born in 1960, the year Nelson Mandela's African National Congress was banned, and came of age as a professional witness in the years leading up to the new South Africa. When political violence of the most brutal kind erupted in the black townships after the release of Mandela from prison in 1990 (and the lifting of the ban on the ANC), Carter and his photojournalist comrades in what came to be called the "Bang-Bang Club" (Greg Marinovich, João Silva, and Ken Oosterbroek) photographed the daily carnage as the dying apartheid government used sectarian tensions between the ANC and the Zulu-backed Inkatha Freedom Party as cover for political murder and destabilizing mayhem.[1]

These photographers witnessed unspeakable things, day in and day out, during this time. They photographed black South Africans being beaten, tortured, hacked to death, and burned alive in Soweto and Thokoza. The worldwide market for such images was booming, and the members of the Bang-Bang Club became famous. Witnessing these things through the camera lens—being a witness to history—was a rush, but it took a toll. The photographers bonded together, but felt themselves drawing away from the rest of society, and suffering various psychological maladies. Kevin Carter was especially

tortured by what he saw, and by the moral ambiguities of his witness role. In an article on covering conflict, he wrote: "I suffer depression from what I see and experience nightmares. I feel alienated from 'normal' people, including my family. . . . The shutters come down and I recede into a dark place with dark images of blood and death in godforsaken dusty places."[2] One recurrent nightmare had him near death, crucified to a wooden beam, while a television camera with a monstrously large lens zoomed in on his face, closer and closer till he awoke screaming.

Because of their newfound notoriety, the members of the Bang-Bang Club began to garner assignments to cover conflicts and suffering elsewhere. In 1993, Carter went to Sudan, where thousands of people were starving to death while a civil war raged on.

In South Africa, Carter had photographed the perpetrators and victims of violence. There were certainly perpetrators and victims in Sudan, but Carter could not get into position to photograph them. What he did happen to find was another kind of image: an image of a vulture appearing to stalk a starving child. The vulture appeared to be waiting for the child to expire and become carrion, to become food. This is a very different kind of violence than the killings Carter had been photographing in South Africa. This is the inexorable violence of the food chain. The problem with this image was that it was difficult for viewers to find, within the image, someone to blame.

The people who reacted so strongly against this image did so not because they objected to the depiction of natural violence more than that of political violence, but because of its symbolism. Though they struck out at the photographer, accusing him of being no better than a vulture, waiting to make this image while a child died, I believe the real reason for their outrage lies elsewhere. I believe they read this image, unconsciously, as a commentary on their own position in relation to the starving child. They thought that *they* were being called vultures, in their hunger for images like this—carrion-eaters feeding off of the misfortunes of others, as consumers of images of violence and pestilence. And, even further, that perhaps this Sudanese child was dying there in the dirt so that we might consume her *image*.

This was too much reality for some viewers to bear. So they reacted in the normal human way: they blamed someone else. We want witnesses, but we demand sacrifice. Someone had to pay for this impropriety. Kevin Carter paid. He killed himself, at age thirty-three, on July 27, 1994, only two months after Mandela was sworn in as president of the new South Africa that Carter had spent his whole life imagining.

Blaming the photographer who makes these images is like blaming a soldier for what's going on in a war. The photographer and the soldier are our representatives, our surrogates. We put them in position to do our bidding. The troops didn't start the war and they don't decide how it is prosecuted. Photojournalists take the kind of pictures that they know they can sell to the news organizations, who sell them to us. Kevin Carter wouldn't

have gone to Sudan on his own. We put him there. We put him in front of that starving child, and then accused him of *moral detachment* for making the image we wanted him to make. Where is our moral engagement in this? Where is our complicity? And where is our forgiveness?

NOTES

1. Greg Marinovich and João Silva, *The Bang-Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). The book was adapted for a 2010 feature film, *The Bang-Bang Club*, directed by Steven Silver.

2. Ibid., p. 53.

Inconvenient Evidence

On the Images from Abu Ghraib

The photographs from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison first appeared in public on the television news program 60 Minutes II *on April 28, 2004, and then in Seymour Hersh's article in the* New Yorker, *posted online April 30, and published in the May 10 issue of the magazine. I immediately began to study the images, and gave my first slide lecture on them at the Los Angeles Times Media Center on June 17, 2004. In October of that year, I gave the lecture for the Human Rights Project at Bard College, and in November, as part of a panel discussion with Seymour Hersh and Luc Sante at the Cooper Union in New York. Over the next six years, I gave a version of the following lecture, accompanied by over a hundred images, twenty-five times, around the United States and in Europe. One of the most extreme reactions to the lecture occurred in Santiago, Chile, as part of an event organized by Alfredo Jaar in 2006. Most Chileans had not yet seen the images, and were stunned to see that the United States had, in fact, engaged in torture.*

For anyone who is fascinated by images and their social and political effects, these are heady times. From 9/11 on, visual images have had a tremendous influence on public perceptions and have often appeared to be the principal drivers of public opinion. Historians will say that this has been happening for a while, but I would argue that the degree of this effect (in proportion to all other factors) has increased significantly since 9/11, and this makes it more important than ever to try to understand how it works. The only way I've found to do that is to try to slow the machinery down long enough to get a good look at its moving parts.

When I first saw the Abu Ghraib images, I didn't quite know what I was looking at. I didn't recognize them, because I'd never seen anything quite like them. One of the first people I discussed the images with was the painter Leon Golub. I asked him why the "detainees" were hooded. If the aim was humiliation and blackmail—which is what some claimed: that these photographs would be used to convince other prisoners to talk, under threat of receiving the same treatment—it seemed like it would be better to be able to show their faces and identify them. And if they were strictly "trophy" images, for bragging rights back home, then why not show the terrified faces of your victims? Golub explained that these were torture images, and that the techniques pictured—hooding, forced nakedness, sexual humiliation, stress positions, dogs, and so on—were all common torture techniques,

right out of the book. "Walling up" with hoods or blindfolds increases the sense of isolation and defenselessness. Essential to torture is the sense that your interrogators control everything: food, clothing, dignity, light, even life itself. Everything is designed to make it clear that you are at the mercy of those whose job it is not to have any mercy. Hooding victims dehumanizes them, making them anonymous and thinglike. They become *just bodies*. You can do anything you want to them.

One of the things that really drove home what Leon was telling me was a report published in the *New York Times* soon after the Abu Ghraib images first appeared on *60 Minutes II* and in the *New Yorker*. Nina Bernstein's "Once Tortured, Now Tormented by Photos" (*New York Times*, May 15, 2004) reported on the immediate effects of these images on some of the four hundred thousand survivors of torture who have sought asylum in the United States. More than a hundred thousand of them live in the New York area. When they saw the Abu Ghraib images, it was like flipping a switch. It awoke all the old traumas and also ignited a new fear for their own safety in America. These are people who came to the United States for refuge from torture, so to see the American government *engaged* in torture shook them to the core.

None of this was new to Leon Golub. He had been looking at, thinking about, and transforming this kind of material in his paintings for many years. Between 1979 and 1985, Golub depicted the use of torture by repressive Central and South American regimes backed by the U.S. government, and by mercenaries helping them to interrogate subjects. Over the years, Leon assembled an extensive archive of photographic images of interrogations and torture from around the world, to use as sources for his paintings.

Just before the Abu Ghraib images were published, a series of images from Fallujah appeared, showing four "private security contractors" being ambushed, burned, mutilated, and hung from a bridge over the Euphrates as carrion. The images from this gruesome reenactment of Goya's Disasters of War were circulating on the Internet within three hours of the acts, and their appearance the next day on the front pages of many U.S. newspapers and in the lead stories of most television news shows had a chilling effect. They recalled the images from Mogadishu in 1993, of a dead U.S. soldier's body being desecrated, which hastened the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia and prompted Osama bin Laden's reputed assertion that the American public cannot stomach this kind of imagery, making America a "weak horse." Surely the thugs on the streets of Fallujah had this in mind on March 31, 2004. They were enraged, but they were also clearly performing for the cameras, just as Ahmed Chalabi's men had done a year earlier, when they toppled Saddam's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square and symbolically mutilated it and dragged it through the streets. The media-consciousness of the Fallujah gang was apparent in their faces, and in the pre-printed signs they displayed, reading in Arabic: "Fallujah—the graveyard of Americans."

One of the reasons these ghastly images had such an effect in the United States was that they broke the embargo that the George W. Bush administration, with the cooperation of

the major American news media, were enforcing on images that showed the daily carnage in Iraq, an embargo extending even to images of the coffins of dead U.S. soldiers being returned to their families. No such censorship applied to the major media seen in Iraq, which regularly showed the broken bodies of some of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men, women, and children killed in the war. The notion of a "clean" war, a war without carnage, is only saleable to a population that has been kept from seeing images of corpses.

But the effect of the Fallujah images was limited by Americans' ability to distance themselves from them. The *New York Post* ran the image of body parts festooning the bridge under the headline "SAVAGES," and Canada's *Globe and Mail* quoted a U.S. woman as saying: "I'm sorry, but we don't do that here. We don't jump up and down on cars to celebrate the burning of human beings." When I read that, I immediately thought of James Allen's 2000 book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, examining in nauseating detail the widespread murder of African-Americans in this country not so very long ago, the mutilation of their corpses, and the gleeful celebrations of the perpetrators being photographed beside their handiwork. As the executive editor of the *New York Times* said about the Fallujah images: "The story was in the *desecration* and in the *jubilation*."

Another effect of the Fallujah images was to reveal to the American public the prominence of hired, private military contractors in the Iraqi conflict. The four men killed and mutilated by the mob in Fallujah were all former U.S. military Special Forces personnel-turned-private contractors, working under a Blackwater USA contract with the Pentagon to provide force protection and personal security for the top U.S. administrator in Iraq at the time, Paul Bremer, among others. They were armed with assault rifles and automatic pistols. The Bush administration did not include the deaths of private military contractors in its death toll for the war, and used these contractors to mask the real costs of the occupation.

Less than a month after the Fallujah images appeared, the release of a few amateur digital snapshots taken by reservist soldiers of the 320th Military Police Battalion changed everything in the image wars. These images showed American soldiers "softening up" Iraqi detainees in the Sadean cells of Saddam Hussein's Abu Ghraib prison just outside Baghdad. The first batch, broadcast on CBS-TV's *60 Minutes II* on April 28, 2004, showed a dead, battered body—packed in ice to escape detection—and the naked, hooded bodies of prisoners being tortured by grinning, gesticulating U.S. soldiers. The reality of these images was grasped immediately by all Iraqis under occupation, and then began to break on the American consciousness in successive waves of recognition and revulsion.

Unlike the British, who immediately questioned the veracity of the *Daily Mirror* images of prisoner abuse published a few days after the Abu Ghraib images (which turned out to be a rather clumsy hoax), we believed the Abu Ghraib images without question, because

they only confirmed what we already knew but didn't want to accept: that behind all the pretty talk about wanting freedom for the good people of Iraq lurked naked aggression, deep-seated cultural contempt, and the arrogant smirk of unilateralism; and the realization that we were now mired in a hellish conflict with no end in sight. The looks on the faces of those reservists, and their easy, hamming body postures, were intended to show that they, unlike the Iraqis, were not subject to the depredations of Abu Ghraib; that they were actually not there at all, but back home, mugging for the camera. The anonymous Iraqis (guilty or innocent, it hardly mattered) were demonstrably *there*, and were ridiculous for being there. Stripped and hooded, they'd become impotent and weak. Let's stack them up like cheerleaders. Let's make them jack off in front of American women and make it look like they're giving each other head.

The most striking thing about the images from Abu Ghraib, and what marks them as unmistakably American, is that peculiar mixture of cold-blooded brutality and adolescent frivolity; of hazing or fooling around, and actual deadly torture—reality and fantasy conjoined. So you have the U.S. reservists Charles Graner and Lynndie England, posing and grinning for the camera as if they're frolicking at Disneyland, and in the same picture you have the corpse of a prisoner who's been tortured to death. Most Americans didn't know what they were looking at when they first saw the images, because they'd never seen torture images before, and the incongruity of the actions of the U.S. soldiers was confusing. The soldiers in the pictures wanted to show their friends and family back home that they were not affected by the ghastly acts they performed in Iraq; that they were not *above* these actions, but *below* them, just like their Commander-in-Chief George W. Bush, whose aw-shucks obliviousness to the grave consequences of his policy decisions was oddly reassuring to some Americans. *What we don't know can't hurt us. We're not responsible. They just hate us because we're free. Shit happens. And besides, it's God's will.*

The Fallujah images arose from a public explosion of rage that was performed for and recorded by professional photojournalists, but the amateur images from Abu Ghraib seemed to have erupted from deep within the American public image unconscious. They seem not to have been taken by anyone, and at the same time, by us all. As Susan Sontag's cover of the May 23, 2004, *New York Times Magazine* spelled it out, "The Photographs *Are* Us." And they put a face on the U.S. occupation of Iraq that will never be forgotten.

For an administration that had manipulated and controlled public images so skillfully during the first year of the war—from Saving Private Lynch to the Falling Saddam to the Top Gun speech to Saddam's capture—President Bush's closest advisors were blindsided by the effects of the Abu Ghraib images. Principal Bush political strategist Karl Rove suggested that the consequences of these images were so great that it would take decades for the United States to recover from them. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's frustration was palpable as he testified before Congress: "We're functioning with peacetime

constraints, with legal requirements, in a wartime situation in the Information Age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise." That is, we don't have a problem with how we are prosecuting this war, we have a problem with controlling images of the war. Paul Virilio's "Big Optics" (if you can *see* the entire battlefield, you've already won the battle) had gone public, and that created a tremendous problem for the Pentagon. With the ubiquity of small, cheap, digital cameras, this problem is probably now insoluble. What was once a tremendous military advantage has now become a political catastrophe. Conservative commentator David Brooks asked: "How are we going to wage war anymore, with everyone watching?" Could this be the apotheosis of Total Surveillance, the saving grace of the Pandaemonium?

As I said before, the Abu Ghraib images seemed to have welled up from the American public image unconscious. But why did these images have such an immediate and profound effect? Why were they so immediately legible?

Looking at the faces of those U.S. soldiers, I tried to find some comparable images, and the documentarian Eric Gottesman found a collection of images online that is certainly relevant. These images show revelers at "blackface parties" held at fraternity houses in Southern colleges and universities recently. All these images ignited public-relations firestorms only after they were discovered on the Internet. These images come from Auburn University, the University of Virginia, the University of Tennessee, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Mississippi, where an image of a man in blackface and straw hat kneeling on the floor picking cotton while a guard holds a gun to his head came out of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity, which bills itself as "America's leadership development fraternity." The first fraternity founded after the Civil War, ATO's mission was "to heal the wounds created by the devastating war and help reunite the North and South."

Another direct reference for the Abu Ghraib images is do-it-yourself Internet porn. A very high percentage of all traffic on the Internet is related to pornography. It's the sticky Web of Onan. And when members of Congress went into that dark, sweaty little room to view the whole cache of 1,800 images from Abu Ghraib (most of which *we* haven't yet seen, and probably never will see), they said the torture images were all interspersed with pornographic images of the U.S. soldiers themselves. So this is certainly a big part of what was going on there. Rush Limbaugh called it "standard good old American pornography" (with a little Orientalism thrown in for spice). Just a few good ol' boys and girls behaving badly.

Bush and Rumsfeld refused to call what happened at Abu Ghraib "torture," because torture is what *other* states do, not the United States. If we're doing it, it must not be torture. Just as the tens of thousands of mercenaries who were employed in Iraq must not

have been mercenaries, but "private military contractors," and setting up a satellite government to take the heat off the U.S. occupation was "turning over sovereignty" to Iraqis. After Mogadishu, what we all saw happening in Rwanda in 1994 was not "genocide," because we would have had to *do* something about genocide. This torturing (twisting) of language has become very effective of late, and has mostly managed to deflect language coming through to counter it. Image rhetorics have also been employed with great facility and effectiveness. So why and how did the Abu Ghraib images threaten this hegemony?

Like the earlier images of the Falling Saddam, these images draw on old image rhetorics, striking similar chords. But unlike those planned images, the Abu Ghraib images were *unconsciously* made, and this gave them a special power to operate in the world of phantasms. Again, these images seemed to have welled up out of our own unconscious, showing us what we knew, but didn't know that we knew.

The iconography of the hooded-figure-on-a-box image is especially, rampantly polysemous. It was legible to us because we immediately, unconsciously, recognized its symbolism. The pointed hat or hood carries the sense of derision and ridicule, as in the dunce cap, and also of judgment and punishment—the interrogators of the Spanish Inquisition wore pointed hats, as do Ku Klux Klan knights. The dunce cap was invented (by medieval theologian John Duns Scotus) as a device to aid cogitation, to "focus the mind," and the actions at Abu Ghraib were ostensibly designed to extract intelligence. So both intelligence (or the lack thereof) and the menace of agency are evoked here. The pointed hood or hat is an ancient symbol and shamanic trope eliciting fear and respect that has inspired numerous artists, from Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* to Joseph Beuys in his *Coyote* action to Joel-Peter Witkin's early Anonymous Atrocities series.

On another level, to hood or shroud the head is a feminizing or emasculating gesture for Muslim men, and for Americans, the gesture of the hands held out in weakness and supplication in the Abu Ghraib figure echoes an earlier image of the victims of war: Nick Ut's 1972 image of the naked Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack, with arms held out from her body like wings.

The image of the hooded figure on a box quickly became an icon around the world, *the* image of the American occupation of Iraq. There is certainly an element of initiation or hazing here (trying to get the pledges to "break"), but what are these Iraqis being initiated into? Hazing is a devolution of initiation rituals, and both hazing and torture are endemic to illegitimate power. Elaine Scarry, in her 1985 book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, wrote: "In torture, it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power." Torture occurs when power is uncertain and illegitimate, when a regime is unstable and weak.

Here is one possible narrative for this emblem of the occupation: *The Iraqi people are the exotic, mysterious Other, but also ridiculous figures of fun. We came to liberate them from their primitive state, to modernize and* electrify *them. But they don't understand, so we must keep them in the dark until the process is complete. We've put them up on a pedestal (the same pedestal from which we pulled down Saddam), but this pedestal is made of cardboard, and if they fall off and get modernized (electrified) too soon, they will be killed. They just don't understand. Can't they see that we've occupied them in order to make them free, and that we may have to destroy them in order to save them?*

Top military officials now say that the interrogations at Abu Ghraib yielded almost no new intelligence, that most of the prisoners tortured by the Americans at Abu Ghraib were not linked to the insurgency, and that 70 to 80 percent of the Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib were innocents swept up in raids. Techniques and procedures designed for "high-value terrorist targets" (in Afghanistan and Guantánamo) ended up being used on "cabdrivers, brothers-in-law, and people pulled off the streets."

Eleven soldiers were eventually convicted of various charges in relation to what happened at Abu Ghraib, including assault, indecency, dereliction of duty, conspiracy to maltreat detainees, and obstruction of justice. But no senior U.S. military or political leaders were disciplined; indeed, many of those responsible were later promoted.

A New Lament of the Images

On President Obama's Decision Not to Release More Images from Abu Ghraib

This lecture was given at the Creative Time Summit: Revolutions in Public Practice, in the Celeste Bartos Forum of the New York Public Library, on October 24, 2009.

Over the years, the artist Alfredo Jaar has become adept at making the absence of images as palpable and powerful as their presence. In August 1994 he went to Rwanda and returned with thousands of images of the aftermath of the genocide there. Over the following five years, he found many ways of evoking those images without actually showing them. In his project *Real Pictures*, first exhibited in 1995, Jaar buried sixty images from Rwanda in black linen boxes with descriptions of their contents printed in white lettering on their lids like epitaphs.

In 2002, Jaar asked me to collaborate with him on a piece for Documenta II in Kassel, Germany. For that project, *Lament of the Images*, I wrote three texts to take the place of images that, for political reasons, we were not allowed to see.

When President Barack Obama announced on May 13, 2009, that he would move to bar the release of more detainee-abuse images from Iraq and Afghanistan, Jaar asked me to collaborate on a new *Lament of the Images*, to be proposed as an op-ed piece for the *New York Times*. I wrote captions for three missing images, to stand in for the many images the president had decided we should not be allowed to see. The *Times* eventually chose not to publish our piece.

In refusing to release more than two thousand images documenting the abuse and torture of prisoners by U.S. military and intelligence personnel, thereby reversing a previous agreement the government had made with the American Civil Liberties Union to release the images on May 28, 2009, Obama used the same rationale that had been espoused by the George W. Bush administration over the previous five years to ban their release: "The publication of these photos would not add any additional benefit to our understanding of what was carried out in the past by a small number of individuals," Obama told reporters. "In fact, the most direct consequence of releasing them, I believe, would be to further inflame anti-American opinion and to put our troops in greater danger."[1]

The precedents for this argument about disclosure versus danger go back to the Pentagon Papers case of 1971, when the Nixon administration argued that the release of documents

telling the true history of the Vietnam War might increase anti-American feelings globally and somehow further endanger the lives of U.S. military personnel. The Supreme Court decided that risk was outweighed by the fundamental rights of a free people to see and evaluate evidence concerning their government's conduct for themselves. The Pentagon Papers were released, resulting in no increased harm to U.S. soldiers.

The courts in the Iraq and Afghanistan images case had heard the defense of withholding images because of national security before, and had rejected it. Judge Alvin K. Hellerstein of the United States District Court in Manhattan ruled that the public's right to know outweighed such a vague, speculative fear of danger to the U.S. military, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld that ruling. Amrit Singh, the attorney who argued the case before the Court of Appeals on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union, which sued for the release of the images under the Freedom of Information Act, told the *New York Times*: "These photographs provide visual proof that prisoner abuse by U.S. personnel was not aberrational but widespread, reaching far beyond the walls of Abu Ghraib."[2]

If the actions depicted in these images were indeed "carried out by a small number of individuals" operating independently, the argument against releasing them would be more convincing. However, the preponderance of the evidence shows that these were not isolated incidents, but in fact the result of policy decisions made far up the chain of command. As Anthony D. Romero, the executive director of the ACLU, told the *New York Times*, decrying Obama's decision to ignore the court's order to release the images: "It is no longer tenable to blame abuse on a few bad apples. These were policies set at the highest level."[3] This means that these things were being done in our names, with our implicit support as participants in a democracy, and we need to know exactly what was done. A functioning democracy cannot afford to close its eyes to what is being done in its name.

We have punished some of the subordinates who carried out these despicable policies, but we now need to hold accountable those who actually formulated them (what has been called in other jurisdictions "The Torture Team": George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Douglas Feith, Alberto Gonzales, John Yoo, David Addington, and William J. Haynes II). And the only way to do that is to view the evidence, including the images.

In an op-ed piece that the *New York Times* did publish, on May 24, 2009, Philip Gourevitch (author, with filmmaker Errol Morris, of the book *Standard Operating Procedure*, on Abu Ghraib, following the 2008 documentary film of the same name directed by Morris) supported Obama's decision to suppress the images. "Just as it was a public service to release the Abu Ghraib photographs five years ago," Gourevitch wrote, "Mr. Obama is right today to say we don't need any more of them."[4] I think this takes the wrong lesson from the Abu Ghraib images. The torture policies of the Bush administration were already available in text documents when

the first images were published in 2003, but the images brought it home in a way that written accounts cannot. Seeing is believing, and unless people see what's been done in their name, they don't believe it in the same way. Gourevitch also wrote: "Today, with all that we know about the Bush administration's torture policy, the discussion about the release of more photos is a sideshow."[5] At a time when images were increasingly driving public political life, this was an anachronism. The discussion about the release of these images was not a sideshow anymore, and President Obama, who showed in the first six months of his presidency a real understanding of the imperatives of the image, should have recognized this.

I certainly understand President Obama's reluctance to spend precious time and energy bringing people involved in the previous administration to justice, but I believe refusing to release crucial evidence in those cases is misguided. Barack Obama was elected in order to restore the rule of law and bring greater transparency into the process of governing. He, and we, cannot afford to compromise those principles at this point in our history. In any case, history shows us that iconoclasm generally doesn't work. When you try to destroy or censor images, those images *gain* power rather than losing it, and often come back to haunt their suppressors.

NOTES

1. Barack Obama, quoted in Jeff Zeleny and Thom Shanker, "Obama Moves to Bar Release of Detainee Abuse Photos," *New York Times*, May 14, 2009.

2. Amrit Singh, quoted in David Stout, "Pentagon to Release Detainee Photos," *New York Times*, April 25, 2009.

3. Anthony D. Romero, quoted in Zeleny and Shanker, "Obama Moves to Bar Release of Detainee Abuse Photos."

4. Philip Gourevitch, "The Abu Ghraib We Cannot See," *New York Times*, May 24, 2009.

5. Ibid.

Over Bin Laden's Dead Body

On Withholding and Displacing Public Images

When President Barack Obama announced in May 2011 that he would not release images of the dead Osama bin Laden, this decision seemed anomalous. When a "Most Wanted" fugitive at this level of notoriety is captured or killed, it is customary to release photographs of the deceased as evidence, and these images often have tremendous propaganda value. When Saddam Hussein's sons Uday and Qusay were killed in a raid by U.S. soldiers in 2003, photographs of their bloodied corpses were widely disseminated, and when their father was eventually captured, tried, and hanged, graphic images of that also emerged.

But there are risks to such exposures, since these images do not always have the effects their perpetrators wish. When Che Guevara was executed by the Bolivian Army (aided and abetted by the CIA) in 1967, his mutilated corpse was proudly displayed to the world press. But the resulting postmortem photographs had the opposite effect to what was intended, eliciting widespread compassion for the slain revolutionary and revulsion toward his killers.

Osama bin Laden was no Che, but he was an extremely charismatic figure and a master of iconopolitics, who meticulously crafted and controlled his image—an image that will be around for a long time. So the handling of his image in death at the hands of the Americans had to be very carefully considered. The public desire for these photographs was so strong that fake pictures of Bin Laden's bloodied corpse appeared all over the Internet immediately following the announcement of his death.

In the current climate of image saturation, withholding images can have a powerful effect. But it can also unleash powers that may be even more difficult to control. Withheld images make way for specters. The two pictures that were put forth to counter this movement, in a sense to displace the withheld photographs of the dead Bin Laden, did so through a kind of *spectral distancing*.

On May 2, 2011, the White House released an image made by in-House photographer Pete Souza showing President Obama and some of his senior staff watching a live feed of the raid on Bin Laden's compound. Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen, and others sit and stand around a table, transfixed by the images that, we know, are appearing on a screen, just off the lower-left corner of the photograph. The Commander-in-Chief sits

low on the left side of the frame, wearing an unbuttoned shirt and a tuxedo jacket, as if he's just left a party, like James Bond. Obama/Bond is in charge, as we can see from his specular position. He is watching, so he is in command and control. And we are watching him watching, as per our new democratic function. This photograph quickly became the most-viewed image ever on Flickr.

A few days later the government released five videos found in Bin Laden's compound during the raid. All went viral immediately, but the one that had the most effect showed an aged, graying Bin Laden watching images of himself on a small monitor. The most dangerous man in the world sits on the floor, wrapped in a brown blanket and wearing a wool cap, clutching a remote and rocking forward and back as if in an autistic/narcissistic trance.

Both of these images, promulgated in the absence of pictures of the dead Bin Laden, arose from the recognition by U.S. authorities that what was important about Osama bin Laden was not his physical body, but his image. Death images are displaced by spectral images. He is shown in the video fawning over his own image like a washed-up performer—a sad, lonely, self-obsessed figure. Obama is shown watching him die—solemnly and firmly. Osama is subject to the image, while Obama controls the image. The orchestration of the displacement, in iconopolitical terms, was masterful. But it was also the continuation of a much larger effort to obscure the real substance of war—the injury, torture, and death of human bodies—by withholding images of carnage.

I suspect that there may be more revelations to come about what actually happened in that Abbottabad compound, but the current lack of documentary images, and the plethora of fictional ones that arose to replace them—such as the 2012 "docudrama" *Zero Dark Thirty*, "based on first-hand accounts of actual events"—should be a signal that we have not yet seen all there is to see.

Some images can be withheld and controlled and some cannot, as they seem to well up and materialize from out of our collective unconscious. In the current interminable rush of images, certain ones stick with us, because they make our unconscious desires and fears physically visible. We recognize them because we have already seen them in our mind's eye.