



Having had the misfortune of enrolling in classes in one of the last registration windows, I think it is more accurate to say that my writing class chose me rather than the other way around. Or rather, there was no choosing at all, but perhaps serendipity or an alignment of the stars that was responsible for my sitting in “Outlaw Images” with Professor Van Hillard that first day of class. Little did I know that the class would be so enthralling as we considered public images of trauma, which are becoming ever-more ubiquitous with today’s technology. We discussed the nature of photography as a representation of reality, the limits and benefits of using such communication, and, most interestingly, the ethical and political issues horrific images have catalyzed. In the early stages of this essay, I knew I wanted to apply the heaps of discussion on the general topic of horrific images to a timely and weighty event in our country—the Abu Ghraib incident. I realized that this was quite a broad agenda, so I eventually narrowed my study to two related parts. First, I analyzed the dichotomous effect of photography in both perpetuating the humiliation of the victims and stimulating social consciousness of the maltreatment. Second, I asked what the incident implies about American morality. I hope my essay will challenge readers to more carefully examine photographs instead of simply accepting them as undeniable evidence.

Valuing the Photographs of Abu Ghraib: The Power of Evidentiary Display

Lauren Kahn

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Professor Van Hillard

On March 19, 2003, President George W. Bush announced the need for the US to invade Iraq: “My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail” (“Operation Iraqi Freedom”). Yet, the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs the following year challenged these same American ideals of freedom and justice. Some of the images depict leering GIs posing with naked prisoners, detainees forced to emulate sexual acts, and clusters of hooded bodies. Some of the images include the American soldiers, others do not. Some show the victims’ full bodies; others only capture certain parts, like a nipple or an ear. Yet, some show no figures at all, only a blood-spattered shirt or floor. All of the pictures hint, some more explicitly than others, at the violence and abuse carried out within the compound.

The photographs, which were initially made public, first by CBS’ “60 Minutes,” and soon thereafter in Seymour Hirsh’s stunning exposé in *The New Yorker*, initiated a crisis in American morality, particularly regarding the Iraq War. The photographs seemed to provide nearly incontrovertible evidence of American brutality and sadistic violence. Yet in addition to the images’ depictive powers and the transgressions they so forcefully convey, the very publication of the photographs catalyzes powerful political and ethical concerns, chief among them a difficult irony: does the value of relatively free global access to the photographs outweigh the harm to Iraqi detainees, whose initial humiliation is worsened as it is witnessed again and again by yet wider audiences?

My chief interest lies with such questions regarding distribution and publicity, especially the dichotomous effect of photography in both perpetuating humiliation of the victims while stimulating social consciousness of the maltreatment. As Javal Davis, a Military Policeman (MP) court-martialed for his activity in the prison, aptly



remarked, “If there were no photographs, there would be no Abu Ghraib. There would have been no investigation” (*Ghosts*). For many, the photographs have come to symbolize America’s catastrophic handling of the Iraq War. The collection, especially the photograph of one Iraqi prisoner nicknamed “Gilligan” balancing on a box and threatened with electrocution, has been reproduced and distributed in magazines, newspapers, television, and all over the internet. The Gilligan photograph, though more publicized, is equally as troubling as the many photographs depicting naked prisoners, sometimes being forced to masturbate or simulate oral sex with other prisoners. Within the context of Islam, it is especially humiliating for men to be naked in each other’s presence. Furthermore, according to Bernard Haykel, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University, “homosexual acts are against Islamic law. ‘Being put on top of each other and forced to masturbate, being naked in front of each other—it’s all a form of torture’” (qtd. in Hersh 2). It is also especially dehumanizing for a Muslim to be exposed in front of women other than their wives. Not only were these prisoners witnessed naked by the female soldiers, but, with the production and widespread dissemination of the photographs, they are now portrayed naked to countless of other strangers, men and women across a variety of cultures.



Photos 1-4. *Left, top:* Spc. Charles Graner poses over Manadel al-Jamadi. *Left, center:* United States Army photo from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq showing Pvt. Lynndie England holding a leash attached to a prisoner collapsed on the floor, known to the guards as “Gus.”

Left, bottom: The prisoner known as “Gilligan” forced to balance on box or risk electrocution.

Above: Prisoner displayed naked.

As art historian James Elkins notes, viewing a person in a compromised position is “aggressive: it distorts what it looks at, and it turns a person into an object in order to let us stare at it without feeling ashamed” (27). Elkins is not the only scholar to call images a tool for objectification. In her essay “On Photography,” Susan Sontag remarks, “there is something predatory about taking a picture...it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (14). Looking at an Iraqi prisoner in a compromised position is to violate his privacy and redefine his identity. He is not a person, but “the prisoner with a bag over his head and wires on his arms” or the “guy on the bottom of the pile.” He is not Satar Jabar, his true name, but “Gilligan,” the name prescribed by his torturers. To label him this way is to ignore his personhood.

To stand naked in the presence of strangers is dehumanizing, torturous even. Disseminating the pho-

tographs perpetuates the violation of human dignity. How ashamed the Muslim prisoner must feel to know that strangers all over the world have access to pictures of his naked body. Not only did the people present at Abu Ghraib witness the humiliation, but the wide distribution of the photographs has amplified the initial abuse, broadening the scope of transgressive publicity to a global audience. Thus, photographs introduce a whole new degree of publicity, a “second degree,” compared to the “first degree” of publicity whereby the American soldiers witnessed the acts first-hand. The “second degree” of publicity is equally as, or arguably even more, violating than the first because it involves a new order of indiscriminate viewers, repeating the first transgression, but through wider publicity, which may increase the initial harm exponentially.

Distributing photographs of torture is a technique that has been used before to incite fear and hate, to reinforce racial prejudice. White supremacists took and distributed photographs of African American lynchings on postcards throughout the US. When the Pakistani radicals captured and beheaded American journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002, they did so on video in order to broadcast fear across the limitless confines of the internet. With regard to the Abu Ghraib photographs, a critic remarked, “If we adopt cruel treatment... we sacrifice our belief in human rights, we sacrifice our belief in the rule of law, and we blur the distinction between ourselves and the terrorists. [This will be] counterproductive in the War on Terror” (Alberto Mora, General Counsel, Department of the Navy, 2001-2006 qtd. in *Ghosts*). Ironically, in fighting the War on Terror, the American soldiers show a striking resemblance to terrorists in the Abu Ghraib photographs. For some viewers, the pictures send the message that American soldiers should be feared.

While critics may argue that exposing the photographs is unpatriotic, hiding them seems outright unethical. Had the images never surfaced, had they not been made available to the public, I fear that MP Davis’s prediction would have come true: without

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the photographs, there would have been no investigation. The violations would most likely have gone unchecked. Photographs such as the Abu Ghraib collection help spread awareness of what is, or has been, happening. Like it or not, we live, and have lived at least since the distribution of the Holocaust images, in an era of photographic truth, where our historical understandings are achieved principally by visual means, where belief follows seeing.

Photographs can serve an evidentiary function, but there are certain limitations. They do not always present the truth, so they should not be the only source of information regarding what happened and who is to blame. The question of blame is much more complex than images can themselves explain. As Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude...it has always been possible for a photograph to misrepresent” (46). When I first learned of the abuse at Abu Ghraib, it was primarily through seeing the images themselves, not by listening to interviews or reading written accounts.



Looking at the images, it appears that the soldiers in the pictures are the only ones to blame. To some extent, the photographs “frame” the soldiers, making them appear to be the sole bearers of the abuse. But, further investigation reveals that the photographs do not tell all. They do not show Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s role or many of the Military Intelligence officers’ roles in agreeing with, even praising, the Military Police officers’ treatment of the prisoners. When he had qualms about torturing the prisoners, Corporal Charles Graner, one of the MPs, received a written notice from his superiors congratulating him on his efforts (Gourevitch and Morris 7). On November 27, 2002, Rumsfeld signed a memorandum approving the use of torture (*Ghosts*). Yet, the photographs do not show his involvement. Framing is, then, one limitation of using photographs as evidence of past actions.

Additionally, the photographs, as portable fragments of reality, can be removed from context, providing another opportunity for misrepresentation. Looking at these images from my kitchen table, the

amount of violence and cruelty seemed almost incomprehensible. How could anyone, let alone GIs, American symbols of pride and justice, behave so inhumanely? Yet, in the context of Iraq, where many soldiers are confronted with shootings and explosions on a regular basis, these images might not be nearly as appalling. In MP Davis’s words, after much ethical unrest, he realized “We’re at war. This is Military Intelligence. This is what they do. And it’s just a job. So, over time, you become numb to it, and it’s nothing. It just became the norm. You see it—that sucks. It sucks to be [the prisoner]. And that’s it. You move on (Gourevitch and Morris 7).” Just as the photographs objectify the prisoners, they unquestioningly label the soldiers as monstrous torturers. I am not suggesting that the soldiers should be exonerated, that it was only human to act inhumane in this circumstance. I am not saying that the situation renders the abuse acceptable. Rather, I want to show that there is more to the picture than suggested. If “a picture says a thousand words,” then a thousand words are scarcely enough to reveal the whole story.

But, ultimately, despite the limitations of frame and context, photographs can, and should, be used as evidence. Why? Photographs attest to the fact that “something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s shown in the picture” (Sontag, *On Photography* 5). The prisoners did have to imitate oral sex. American soldiers clumped hooded and naked detainees in a pile on the floor. The blood on the shirt came from someone. Though we certainly must acknowledge the many ways in which global distribution exacerbated personal harm for detainees, to censor the photographs’ publication, and thereby radically delimit their evidentiary potential, would simply facilitate the abuses in a more troubling way.

Despite the way in which photographs inevitably mediate a clear view of a certain reality, the Abu Ghraib images were accepted as truth all around the globe and judged accordingly. As Sontag claims in “The Photographs *Are Us*,” “Photographs have an insuperable power to determine what we recall of events, and it now seems probable that the defining association of people everywhere” of America’s Iraq War “will be the Abu Ghraib photographs of torture” (25). What picture does the Abu Ghraib incident paint of America? The US is a world superpower. As such, other countries look to us for leadership and a sense of high moral standard. Yet, the photographs blatantly contradict American values of justice and freedom, the purported basis of why we entered Iraq in the beginning. Scott Horton, Chairman of the Committee on International Law, NYC Bar Association, asserts, “These photographs from Abu Ghraib have come to define the United States. The US, which was viewed as certainly one of the principle advocates of human rights and the view of

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the dignity of human beings in the world, suddenly is viewed as a principal expositor of torture” (*Ghosts*). Mora adds, “The United States used to be the model [of human rights], but it is no longer.”

If the individuals were responsible, it shows a breach in the chain of command. Worse yet, if the individuals were “only following orders from their superiors,” the photographs throw into question the credibility and top-most authority of the US government. However, the pictures make no distinction. The torturers represent America. The world judges and remembers the incident based on the photographs, and by the photographs, America is guilty. Indeed, “the photographs are us.” (Sontag, “The Photographs *Are Us*” 26).

But, that is not all: our *response* to the photographs also defines America, for better or worse. Our reaction to the photographs provides an opportunity for the country to potentially redeem her image around the world. Unfortunately, the government’s reaction to the incident only worsened the situation. Instead of taking the time to assess the entire chain of command, attention has focused primarily on the lower-ranking officials. Only a handful of ground-level soldiers received prison sentences (*Ghosts*). Yet, closer to the top, Geoffrey Miller, the General in charge of monitoring Iraq war prisons including Abu Ghraib, not only walked away from the matter unscathed, but was actually rewarded! In 2004, he was promoted to deputy commanding general for detainee operations in Iraq, including Abu Ghraib. In 2006, he received the Distinguished Service Medal at the Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes. In addition to only minor players receiving censure, in October, 2006, President Bush signed the Military Commissions Act, further eroding the rights of prisoners guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions. Donald Rumsfeld encouraged poor prisoner treatment but walked away from the case unpunished (“Rumsfeld Must Go”). Again, it appears this administration has ignored the photographs’ opportunity for moral re-evaluation.

While the government’s poor handling of the situation has further tarnished America’s public image, the very fact that the images were made public allows for traditional American ideals to flourish. It was by the first amendment right of freedom of the press that the images were released in the first place, allowing the truth, as ugly as it is, to be exposed. America’s founding fathers set up the government as a

system of checks and balances, a dynamic process to try to prevent one branch of the government from abusing its power.

I would like to extend this idea of checks and balances to the American people. In the case of government abuse, the American people have certainly been upfront about “checking” the Bush Administration, demanding that we strive for the ideals laid down by our Constitution. I must say I am proud of many Americans’ criticism in response to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Exercising her first amendment right to freedom of speech, Sontag harshly censures certain parts of the American military and civilian administrators as “a shadowy empire of evildoers” (“The Photographs *Are Us*” 29). *The New York Times* called for Secretary Rumsfeld’s resignation, steaming that he has turned “from a man of supreme confidence to arrogance, then to almost willful blindness” (“The New Iraq Crisis”). *The Boston Globe* reported Rumsfeld’s “culpability in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal” to be “embarrassing and inexcusable” (“Rumsfeld Must Go”). The May 2004 issue of *The Economist* featured a provocative cover story: in bright yellow cautionary lettering read the title “Resign, Rumsfeld” above an Abu Ghraib torture photograph. In 2005, protestors from the human rights group Global Exchange interrupted US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s speech on US foreign policy (“Abu Ghraib Protest”). They staged an imitation of the Gillian wire photograph and then yelled “Stop the torture!” In a survey taken recently after the Abu Ghraib incident, twice as many Americans opposed torturing terrorist suspects (Morris and Langer).

These charged responses of embarrassment, anger, and the call for change attest to a measure of American moral integrity. At least on some level, this response shows that portions of the public conscience are very much alive, energized by the horrific photographs. At the same time, as tempting as it is to become swept away by American idealism, the photographs serve as a reminder that America is not so righteous to be exempt from fault. The photographs provide a certain “truth” that may have otherwise been overlooked. However, we must be careful not to give photographs too much evidentiary power. Photographs, by their very nature, have edges, and thus can both frame and exclude. Viewers must understand that the photographs should be not be used as definitive evidence, but rather as a springboard for further examination.

Along with their sheer physical power, the Abu Ghraib images have the power to spark investigations into what exactly happened, prompt questions about responsibility, raise doubts about interrogation techniques, and catalyze deeper concerns about war altogether.

The Abu Ghraib photographs served as a collective mirror, giving the public a well-needed glance at the situation, a glance so overwhelming ugly that it prompted the government to seek further, to investigate. Along with their sheer physical power, the Abu Ghraib images have the power to spark investigations into what exactly happened, prompt questions about responsibility, raise doubts about interrogation techniques, and catalyze deeper concerns about war altogether. Finally, recognizing the problem is necessary for reconciliation and redemption. The photographs have the power to stimulate necessary change, and to allow the American people to show the world that Abu Ghraib is an aberration, not a representation, of American values.

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