What remains of Abu Ghraib?: digital photography and cultural memory

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Ten years on, the photographs from the US-operated Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib have become synonymous with the war on terror for highlighting an unseemly combat culture. This article focuses on the ongoing functions of these viral photos as objects of cultural memory and also highlights their use as war trophies. Drawing on theories of digital photography, emotional and gestural communication, visual semiotics, and cultural memory, this article examines six of the circulated images. Focusing on the symbolic, the visual contents of the photos are contrasted with the rhetorical account from criminal investigator Brent Pack in the documentary Standard Operating Procedure. While Pack concludes that these images are in fact abusive, he nevertheless dismisses the relevancy of the emoting individuals within the photographs. The arguments here take a particular shape: the pictorial display of emotion is not only relevant, but is essential to the communication of group identity and the perpetuation of cultural memory, which is reinforced by the role that digital photographic technology plays in aiding the circulation of this cultural memory.

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-Brent Pack, Army Special Agent Criminal Investigation Division, Standard Operating Procedure

The Abu Ghraib photographs function as trophies in which smiling American soldiers proudly display their prowess to the camera as they stand over the naked bodies and hooded or obscured faces of Iraqi prisoners.

-Wendy Kozol, Battlefield Souvenirs and the Affective Politics of Recoil

It seems apt to revisit the Abu Ghraib images with this past year marking a decade since their original publication. Having shaped much of the analysis of the events, as well as the subsequent tenure of the US military in Iraq, these images have significance even today because of their rich visual impact. With mention to only a few, many cultural arenas have been influenced by these images: visual artists Martha Rosler, Fernando Botero, Alfredo Jaar and Phillip Toledano each created paintings or installations; jokes have appeared on the sitcom Arrested Development in addition to having been the focus of numerous late night talk show quips; the popular meme ‘Doing a Lynndie’ was sparked to enable the public to create and post their own version, illustrating how easily one can make fun of others simply by pointing at a subject of ridicule and posing with a thumbs-up; and finally, the copious amounts of graphic and detailed global media coverage since 2004. These instances couple with the ubiquity of digital camera technology and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East generally, leaving one to wonder when more images of the sort might once again be publicised. In fact, that time might be approaching: a US judge on 20 March 2015 ordered the release of over 2000 photos unless the US Department of Defence can provide sufficient evidence for continuing to withhold publication (The NYT 2015). Taken in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade, some officials describe the contents of these images as ‘worse than Abu Ghraib’ (NYT Editorial Board 2014).

Darren Newbury’s editorial in the 2004 special issue ‘Ethics in Visual Research’ emphasised a common theme in Visual Studies surrounding the ‘uses of the visual’. Newbury invited analyses of the Abu Ghraib images, seeking consideration for how they refocused attention on the production of photography, specifically concerning how ‘photography is done, by whom, and to what ends’ (2004, 121). Addressing this last concern, this article focuses on the ongoing functions of the photographs as objects of cultural memory. With this in mind, what has struck me specifically as memorable about the photographs from Abu Ghraib are the smiles

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on the faces of the featured US military members. These aspects are spectral: at once we see the humiliating placement of the detainees bodies juxtaposed to the ordinarness of the smiles of the US military personnel. Thinking of these smiles at this point in time, with 10 years having past, they still feel jarring. Perhaps considering them now would not only help us to understand this particular incident, but would also aid further research in the areas of critical visual culture and communication generally, and specifically with regard to the uses and practices of soldiers’ war photography and trophy collection.

Considered here are the values and purposes of the visible emotions in the Abu Ghraib photographs. Problematised is the proximity of the emoting US military members in relation to the hooded detainees who are forced to communicate without facial expression. This combination, I argue, is the point of photographic capture in the production of these war trophies. In so considering, this article compares the symbolic contents of six circulated photographs to the verbal comments made by Army Criminal Investigation Division Special Agent, Brent Pack, in the documentary film Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Few analyses exist of Pack’s interpretations, and since he was hired by the US military to assess what occurred, his account is perhaps the most influential in determining how these images will be discussed and remembered.

The arguments here take a particular shape: the pictorial display of emotion is not only relevant, but is essential to the communication of group identity and the perpetuation of cultural memory, which is reinforced by the role that digital photographic technology plays in aiding the circulation of this cultural memory. Outlined briefly here, first, the circumstances surrounding the publication of the photos are summarised. Next, in order to critically consider Pack’s assessment, theoretical orientations of cultural memory and pictorial emotion are put forth to combine with the social and technological uses of digital photography. Along with these theoretical positions, a textual analysis using visual semiotics is conducted. Subsequently, the sociocultural value of these photographs, as trophies of war, is considered.

**BACKGROUND**

The events leading to the investigation of the Abu Ghraib photographs bear mention. Whistleblowing Sergeant Joseph Darby was handed the images from Specialist Charles Graner after asking fellow enlisted members for photographs of their time in Iraq. Known photographic enthusiast Graner gave Darby two compact disks, one that contained conventional, tourist-like images of scenery from around Hilla and Baghdad, while the other was composed of suspicious content. Many of these photographs featured naked and hooded Iraqi detainees in demeaning and sexually suggestive poses, while the participating US military members stand alongside, smiling and gesturing. Though many of the infamous images circulated between military members, friends, and family beyond the base (Hersh 2004), Darby had not previously seen them. Believing that the photographs ‘crossed a line’ – claiming that he was disturbed by the images because the content depicted acts aimed at humiliating the prisoners – Darby turned the disks over to the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command (Hylton 2006). On 27 April 2004, the news went public via a telecast of 60 Minutes, stating that American military members took photographs of themselves using questionable force against Iraqi prisoners during their command at the Abu Ghraib prison (Leung 2004).

While Darby was upset by the images, describing them as ‘disturbing’, not everyone saw the photographs in the same way. To be sure, Pack is one of these people. In SOP, Pack states, ‘you can’t bring emotion or politics into the court’ (Morris 2008, 00:16:20). Pack is adept at leaving both emotion and politics out of judicature with this statement, though perhaps to a fault: he was hired to fully consider the images, and even he claims to see emotion, if not politics, in the photographic frames.

**PACK’S TESTIMONY: ‘TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OF THESE THINGS IS THAT ONE SOMETHING STUPID’**

The person appointed to assess the contents of the Abu Ghraib photographs, one might assume, would be someone with a comprehensive knowledge and skill set regarding this role. Pack is not a photography expert, technically, aesthetically or otherwise. Rather, he was hired for his expertise in forensic investigation. Specifically, he was charged with the task of crime detection, which Pack appraised by attributing a timeline to the events featured in the photographs (Morris 2008, 00:43:55). With Pack’s account, the viewing public is told what to see, and what not to see, specifically in relation to the temporality of the photographed events. Though we are free to draw our own conclusions, Pack’s analysis carries the weight of authority and legitimacy with the narrative he forms.

In SOP, Pack concludes that although these images do in fact depict abuse, he nevertheless dismisses the relevance of the emoting and gesturing within the
photographs, as that which are nothing more than ‘standard operating procedure’ (Morris 2008, 1:27:55). To this end, Pack confirms that the images depict abuse because of the overt connotations of sexuality and humiliation (1:15:50). Beyond this, Pack seems more concerned simply with the existence of the photographs: ‘I’d say over half of all my cases were solved because the criminal did something stupid. Taking photographs of these things is that one something stupid’ (00:15:55). As a result, a spectre of foolishness looms large; the US military personnel get into trouble for having a lack of sense. The contents of the images, however, do not seem to impel Pack beyond euphemistic finger wagging. Cursorily describing the images, Pack discusses what he sees:

The facial expressions kind of set the tone for what they [the US military personnel] were thinking and feeling at the time. You look in their eyes and it looks like they’re having fun. This scene is what sealed their fate… It’s not so much that you’re there committing these acts of abuse; if you were in the pictures while this stuff was going on, you were going to be in trouble. (Morris 2008, 1:15:50)

In his own words, Pack affirms that the images were illustrative of the fun being had by the participating US military members, largely due to the looks on their faces. Oddly contradicting himself, this particular information is what ‘sealed their fate’ for convictable offences (Morris 2008, 1:16:10). With this, Pack recognises the embodiment of enjoyment yet subverts his own acknowledgment by claiming these visual markers as inapplicable:

Photographs are what they are. You can interpret them differently, but what the photograph depicts is what it is. You can put any kind of meaning to it but you are seeing what happened at that snapshot in time. You can read emotion on their faces and feelings in their eyes, but that’s nothing that can be entered into fact. All you can do is report what’s in the picture. (Morris 2008, 1:39:40)

For Pack, the contents combine with the existence of the photographs to solely make visible the criminal acts carried out.

Lastly regarding Pack’s testimony, he sees these photographs through the lens of a soldier. Himself an enlisted member, he states that civilians could not possibly understand the context of combat, including what occurred at Abu Ghraib (Morris 2008, 1:28:10). While Pack might not have intended to be persuasive with his account, he nevertheless defends and justifies his judgements rhetorically. His language works in defence of those enlisted in the military, arguing that it might only be possible to understand the events at Abu Ghraib if one had personal experience in combat. Pack makes this statement:

It was important to separate those that were criminal acts and those things that were not criminal acts. And that’s what the prosecution would have to focus on. If somebody was physically injured you know you have a criminal act. Putting somebody into sexually humiliating positions, you have a criminal act…they [the prisoners] weren’t being tortured per se. They were going through discomfort to try and aid in attaining information. I’ve been in the army for 20 years and I’ve been to Desert Storm One. I spent four months at Guantanamo Bay. People that haven’t been to where I’ve been, I can’t expect them to see the pictures the same way. (Morris 2008, 1:27:10)

With this account, Pack at once both removes and affirms the ethical responsibilities of soldiers. It is surprising that Pack’s assignment is to fully consider ‘what is in the picture’ and yet he overlooks the purposeful composition of these images, which is not only illustrated within the photographic frames in the form of physical posing and props used, but also is indicative of the criminal acts he proclaims to see.

**CULTURAL MEMORY: WORKING WITH JAN ASSMANN’S DEFINITION**

Jan Assmann states, ‘cultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity’ (2008, 110). To be certain, while there are multiple types of memory – ranging from that which derives from the inner self, the social but singular self, to that which is cultural – cultural memory is something that belongs to groups of people who share the same space, time and/or material objects, and is rooted in both historical and mythical narratives. Assmann outlines numerous aspects that foster cultural memory, though for our purposes here, I will be concentrating on a single element: the concretion of identity, which particularly concerns the normative formation of groups that are ‘characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not’ (1995, 130).

Assmann further defines the concept of cultural memory as ‘a kind of institution. It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms’ (2008, 110), and it ‘directs behaviour and experience in the
interactive framework of a society’ (1995, 126). Cultural memory, as such, is reproduced in the sharing of material objects, which Assmann calls ‘figures of memory’ (1995, 129) or ‘reminding objects’ (2008, 111). These objects are readable texts that further inscribe and reinforce social protocol and practices with the sharing thereof. Maintained through cultural formation, these memory objects represent fixed moments or points in time that resituate past inscriptions in the present when circulated. In so operating, the reminder of past events imbues the present with a valuable and consistent narrative. Citing images as one of these kind of textual objects, Assmann affirms: ‘things do not ‘have’ a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them’ (2008, 111). The value of memory objects thus rests in their symbolic function.

SYMBOLISM AND VISUAL SEMIOTICS

Taking Pack’s account as problematic, this article works to explain why the visible emotions in the photographs are relevant for what is symbolised. I argue that the emotional expressions of the military personnel are important, in addition to that which is readable on the bodies of the naked and hooded prisoners, which contributes to the images’ function as trophies of war. With this, I am considering the symbolic according to Peircean visual semiotics. Symbols, to clarify, rely upon social convention for consistent and consensual – or at the very least, commonly understood – meaning generation that is specific to the circumstances of that particular moment (Peirce 1991, 239). As such, meaning is derived from what can be ascertained according to the relationships, between people as well as nonhuman things, that are displayed within the image. Visual semiotician Sandra Moriarty states that images are composed of unfolding chains of codes, and meaning from these codes is derived when the viewer understands the signs contained therein (2002, 20–21).

Visual semiotics according to Peirce takes shape as a triadic model whereby these chains of codes unravel to become the ‘interprets’ as aspects of the sign are read. Briefly here, this triadic model contains three elements: (1) the ‘representamen’, known as the form of the sign; (2) an ‘interpreten’, as the sense or interpretation made of the whole sign and, (3) a signalling thing or ‘object’ to which the sign refers (Peirce 1931–36, 484). For Peirce, a sign only signifies something when it is interpreted. Such a reading is purely arbitrary; however, the reading is entirely dependent on social convention and practice (Moriarty 2002, 21). Said another way, determinations of meaning from a representation, however interpretive, are nevertheless comprehensible and reliable if the associations or networks of relationships that led to the interpretation are exposed.

Using Peirce’s triadic model, then, this study situates that the Abu Ghraib photographs are signs of war trophies, and are outlined by the following: the representamen are the digital photos; the signalling object can be found in the visible emotional and gestural communication; the interpretant is the cultural memory that solidifies group differences, between the US military and the Iraqi detainees, in the making of pictorial trophies. To this end and from this point onward, each element will be discussed in turn, as well as together.

THE MEDIUM OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

An inherent assumption regarding photography is that the camera can capture moments without intervention. This notion is false: the act of picking up a camera, turning it on and directing the viewfinder requires processes indicative of a lapse in time. Planning exists for photographers in terms of what they hope to capture, at the very least; the existence of a photograph automatically determines that at least one person, the photographer, has decided that this moment is worth capturing. Though this might be the case, what ultimately becomes a focal point within the frame is beyond the control of the photographer, as this is established by viewers upon circulation of the photographs and is dependent upon the visible elements to which viewers are attuned.

Instantly recallable, and with the number of exposures limited only to the size of the memory card, digital photography makes it easier to render an ideal pose. In Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op, Kiku Adatto states: ‘digital photography that makes pictures so easy to take and share has transformed how we use pictures in our daily lives. We increasingly experience the world as an occasion for posing. Never has the camera been more ubiquitous, the method of transmission so quick, the temptation to take pictures so great’ (2008, 36). While perhaps this study situates an extreme phenomenon – an international scandal featuring the photographing of abuse at the hands of US military members – the most basic functions and uses of photographic practices are present. Simply stated, people take pictures of each other (or ‘selfies’ of themselves) posing all the time, and do so in a manner that allows them a moment of personal composition prior to photographic capture. The result, as can be seen on
many of the faces of the US military personnel in the Abu Ghraib photos, often features subjects looking into the camera lens and smiling. Posing as such brings an awareness of the camera which reinforces the intentionality of the photographic act; it is in these moments where it is possible for one to reveal a deliberate self in personal arrangement and composition (Stott 1986, 268).

The images from Abu Ghraib raise concern for the use of the personal digital camera, and now the smartphone, in the field of war. In reference to our case here, the representamen are the result of three digital cameras that were used at Abu Ghraib (Morris 2008, 00:44:10). Regarding these digital devices, this technology alters the landscape of photographic practices that were once exclusively analogue based. Following this further, digital devices enable personal photography to be less private, to be more accessible and to be more public (Van House 2011). Mette Sandbye and Jonas Larsen describe the emergence of this phenomenon:

Photographs are now very widely produced, consumed and circulated on computers, mobile phones and via the internet, especially through social-networking sites. The digitization of images thus implies media convergence of new performances of sociality reflecting broader shifts towards real-time, collaborative, networked ‘sociality at a distance’. In 2001 the first camera phone was put on the market, but they only really began to sell in high volumes in 2004… At that time, 68 million digital cameras and 246 million camera phones (mobile phones with inbuilt digital cameras) were sold worldwide. (2013, xvi).

The digital camera or smartphone thus allow for a greater capacity to capture and disseminate photos than the analogue equivalent. As a result, this ‘sociality at a distance’ is made nearer via the digital. Where the digital and the analogue converge, however, is in the production of visual record; though digital technologies continue to grant greater access to these photographs, it is the contents of these images that foster cultural memory, and in particular, the concretion of group identity with pictorial displays of emotion.

**Emotion in Photographs**

The act of smiling before a camera moves through tradition and ritual whereby the display of contentment – whether accurately depicting a felt emotion or not – is privileged. We perform in front of the camera for the very purpose of producing an emotive visual record (Rose 2010, 7). Such a focus intends to frame the composed subjects in a desirable manner, and in so doing, constitutes a moment worth remembering. With the capture of photographic moments, we strive to present ourselves as idyllic, with coifed hair and made-up faces, wearing our finest garments. While not all photographs entail such finely detailed primping and planning, it is nonetheless easy to recall the memories of previous photographic events in which these meticulous adjustments took place: grade school picture days, weddings, birthdays, graduations, or even more ordinary occasions like dinner with friends. We ‘say cheese’ in order to manifest a smile because pronouncing the word ‘cheese’ displays our open mouths in a flattering, friendly way. In these moments, we do not smile necessarily out of happiness, but rather because this is how we would like to be remembered. Subsequent viewers to a photograph, including ourselves, will see and recall this moment in this precise manner. Performances like this have become even easier to photograph with the emergence of the digital camera.

Eamonn Carrabine discusses the Abu Ghraib images in terms of the faces that can be seen within the frame. Indicating that the soldiers’ faces are plainly visible, while the faces of the prisoners are often hidden, a distinction of worth is drawn (2011, 15). Those that are fully visible relay information easily and mark the image as valuable with this emotive display. Yet, it is equally important to acknowledge that emotions can be expressed elsewhere on the body, besides the face; even though we cannot see the faces of the detainees, the composition of their nude, slack and slumped bodies tell a story of vulnerability and subordination, which are expressions that are equally valuable for the reproduction of group identity. Emotions, in this way, enhance what is knowable by providing communicable, socially recognisable, visible evidence on the body itself (Ahmed 2004). As a visual mnemonic aid, photographs make human emotions more recognisable. While a photograph is a two-dimensional object and only indicative of the human body, it nevertheless enables emotional and gestural communication to be recognisable and recallable. With this, Gillian Rose claims that the public sphere is constituted through the collective display and experience of feelings; participation in public occurs via mutual ‘performance of emotional display’ (2010, 7). To be sure, emotional display is understandable because of the shared meaning that can be derived from the presented information (Berlant 2008), and for our case here, visible emotions offer a signalling mark for Peircean semiotic analysis.
Continuing the above line of thought, though Pack claims irrelevance, photographs easily present such information. I argue that emotional presentation and recognition is at the very heart of the cultural practice of photographing human subjects. Photography is particularly useful in the display of human emotion because of the indexical capabilities of the medium. In part, meaning is attributed to the photograph at the moment of capture, and once created, is used to visually commemorate events with subsequent viewings (Barthes 2010; Sontag 1977). While a myriad of interpretations exist when viewing a photograph, including ones foreign to the photographer based on different associations made between the image and viewer (Van House 2011, 132), Pack fails to acknowledge this possibility. Rather, Pack affirms that he is not ascribing meaning to the photos and instead is simply reading them. While Pack is correct in saying that one can only report what is portrayed within the frame, he nevertheless makes a biased assumption concerning the visible emotive content. The significance that can be derived from the emotional expressions within the frame is certainly interpretive – and is also context dependent – but they are nonetheless present. Whether or not he gives it credit, the staging of emotion within these photographic frames is purposeful (Bresheeth 2006, 57; Mechling 2004, 73). As a result, the US military members are meant to be seen as content, if not gleeful, because of their overt portrayal of achievement.

‘REPORTING WHAT’S IN THE PICTURE’: DESCRIPTIONS AND ANALYSIS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Mitchell states that the photographs from Abu Ghraib amass the most spectacular and disturbing images from the war on terror (2011, 112). Positing that the most iconic in the Abu Ghraib image archives are those of the naked human pyramid, Mitchell proclaims that these images are so strikingly memorable that recalling them may only require a verbal reminder (113). What is perhaps most remarkable about the photographed events at Abu Ghraib is that, without visual evidence, the abuse would likely not have come under such scrutiny. Pack himself makes the claim that it was the photographs themselves that constituted the offence, not so much the photographic contents; the production of the photographs was itself the crime (Mitchell 2011, 126; Morris 2008, 15:55). What the images have to hide is a dark military secret: they not only illustrate the barbarity of those who posed the detainees but also authenticate the abuse with documentation of the events themselves. This section contains an analysis of six of the circulated photographs.³

Canvas hoods cover the heads of the Iraqi prisoners as they awkwardly cling to each other’s bodies, made to form a human pyramid. It seems expressly graphic and illustrative of physical vulnerability to perform such actions naked, and even more so, when not by one’s own volition. Also in this image, a fully clothed Specialist Charles Graner and Specialist Sabrina Harman stand behind the prisoners. Harman is beaming,⁴ crouched down in front of Graner, as he stands behind her. He, too, smiles widely. Green medical latex gloves cover both of Graner’s hands while he gives a thumbs-up sign with the left. Clothing formerly worn by the detainees lines a wall taking the shape of a haphazard pile.

This image is temporally similar to Figure 1, as the prisoners are mirrored in the same cumbersome, physically difficult to sustain manner. This image shows their nakedness, featuring exposed genitals, while the hands and arms of each detainee clumsily and arduously grasp the other nude bodies. Behind them stand Graner and Specialist Lynndie England, who are fully clothed; arms wrapped around each other, free hands make thumbs-up gestures. Large smiles appear on the faces of both England and Graner.

The setting of both of the human pyramid photographs resembles a windowless basement, whereby one of the images features prison bars in the background, while the other features numerous doors. Additionally, both of these photos illustrate the authority of the US military personnel, as well as their camaraderie. Garner and Harman smile with their bodies close, demonstrating a chummy account of their relationship. England and Graner embrace one another, positioned in unification. All three look directly into the camera without any scepticism, an act of confidence. Conversely, the Iraqi prisoners are stripped and shamed: clutched together yet isolated in their own nakedness, they are unable to facially emote though their desperately awkward hand positions speak to their vulnerability. This type of communication is a disturbing feature of the photographs, particularly when contrasted to the overt smiles of the pictured US military personnel.

This photo features four naked and hooded men. Three of them stand, two of which are in the background, while one man kneels in front of another foregrounded standing man. The two men in the background appear as though they wish not to be present: the man on the left is made to simulate masturbation, his head only partially included in the frame, while his torso and right side of his body angle away from the foregrounded action. The head of the man on the right bends forward, his hands covering the sides of his face and ears, rendering him small and physically expressing disfavour.
The man who kneels simulates fellatio on the foregrounded man, a hood appearing to cover the front of his face. The positions of the hands of the two foregrounded men are noteworthy: while the man who stands rests his hands on the head of the man who kneels, the hands of the kneeling man rest limply on his own thighs, which couple his concaved back. The physicality of the kneeling man is subdued, particularly with regard to his slack hands, which speaks in muted tones of the coercion used beyond the frame.

This image widely circulated with a moniker assigned to the man therein ‘Gus’, as he came to be known, can be seen on the bottom right of the frame. Naked on the floor, though only from the waist up, he faces the camera. His eyes appear closed, his head slack and seeming to be near resting on the floor. While his right arm is extended in front of his torso, his left arm curves seemingly to be near resting on the floor. Besides the man therein.

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The descriptions of these two photographs are collapsed into one because they equally depict Manadel al-Jamadi and the accompanying US military subjects; the two images are comparable, if not altogether interchangeable. The photos feature an already deceased al-Jamadi, who was killed at Abu Ghraib during interrogation (Mayer 2005). The images do not show how he died but instead are taken afterward. In both photos, al-Jamadi appears the same: laying in an unzipped black body bag, the only visible portion of his body, the torso, is hidden behind bags of ice. His head, while visible, is turned slightly away from the camera, mouth eerily agape, with the only potentially visible eye bandaged behind white gauze. There is a bloody sore next to his bandaged eye. Above him in each photo is either Sabrina Harman or Charles Graner; while Harman bends from the waist to be in frame, Graner bends his knees and crouches down. Besides the different postures, Graner and Harman appear the same: both smile showing teeth, and both give a thumbs-up with their right hands. The only other marked difference between the two is what they do with their left hands: Harman uses hers to prop herself up within the frame, placing it on the body bag for support. Graner, conversely, holds his index finger upward, the accompanying thumb wrapped over the third finger. This gesture commonly indicates that a moment is needed before that which is to occur next, or it can indicate success by way of claiming ‘first place’ or a ‘number one’ position. Mirroring championship sports photography, this latter explanation is more likely the case here, as Graner appears ready for the shot with his accompanying hand posed in a thumbs-up. In this way, each of Graner’s hands gesture towards the other, both marking success.

Textural Attributes and Sociocultural Framework

Regarding quality, colour tone and digital camera technology, the photographs are highly pixelated. Resembling what seems a sepia colour tone, the quality of the photographs is actually the result of poor or florescent lighting in a windowless basement. These photos were taken in 2003, at which point digital cameras did not produce images with high levels of resolution. The resulting quality and colour tone, I suggest, reinforces the already geographical and political distance of this war by adding a kind of poor resolution-based temporal distance, one that hints towards the semblance of photographs from an earlier era. Similar colour and textural tones appear in images from the 1970s and 1980s, and looking at these today conjures tinges of humour and quaintness. While not overt, these associations tacitly inscribe the Abu Ghraib images with an oddly old-fashioned, if not distant or remote quality, though because we are aware of when they were taken, the images also suggest a comparison to highly accessible digital photo manipulation or processing tools like Hipstamatic. As viewers of these images a decade after they have been captured and circulated – and juxtaposed to the idea of these current processing technologies – perhaps the jest is at once more perplexing, horrific and questionably violent.

Moving beyond textural attributes, the sociocultural conditions surrounding these particular photographic images deserve consideration. While the Abu Ghraib photographs of rogue American military members abusing Arab men can be interpreted using numerous perspectives, certain descriptive characteristics of
inequality can be noted regardless of the framework used (Puar 2004; Razack 2008; Tucker and Triantafyllos 2008). Illustrated here is such a framework of inequality. These photographs feature the collection of subjugated and humiliated ‘enemy’ bodies posed at the hands of dominant, smiling soldiers. Perhaps most significant when discussing the contents of the images is the difference between posing and being posed, in terms of subject–object power relations, whereby the soldier is the posing subject of the photo and the detainee is an object being posed within the photo. Made to conjure both suggestive sexuality – homophobic in tone – and physical submission, the detainees are shown with clothing removed, canvas sacs covering many of their heads. The military personnel, on the other hand, break the filmic fourth wall by making eye contact with the lens, invoking an imaginary yet assumed audience, perhaps consisting of select family and friends who were privy to the digital photos for months before the images went viral. Generally, the compositional structure of these images has come to reflect colonial relations of power and subordination (Apel 2006; McClintock 2009; Puar 2004).

Finally, the focus of photographic capture in war has not been random but instead has often been the result of careful construction (Bresheeth 2006, 57; Zelizer 1998, 32), and such construction can be seen in the staging of in the Abu Ghraib photographs (Apel 2005, 93; Beier 2007, 266; Lambek 2010, 172). As Mitchell suggests, for what is contained therein, the Abu Ghraib images will ‘continue to haunt all attempts to understand this period [the war on terror or post 9/11]’ (2011, 118). This haunting is more than simple awareness of the photographs. Perhaps the character of the images is itself the spectre, which can specifically be noted as the eerie faces of the US military personnel. How these photos are read across mass culture impacts the way in which the events can be remembered, and with this, we now turn to discussions of the interpretant.

**VISUAL TEXT AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CULTURAL MEMORY**

To make a moving thing remain still as a photographic image does suggests that the single depicted moment is coded as a visual impression, thus becoming something recallable with each subsequent viewing. As such, photographs are suffused with memory. To this end, it is the digital attributes of photography that reinforce the public remembrance of the Abu Ghraib images; while photography certainly pre-exists the introduction of the digital, ubiquitous online access to these images is precisely accounted for by digital technologies.

More than mere personal souvenirs of those who captured the photos, these images have entered into the cultural memory of those familiar with the war on terror. Marked by the 10-year anniversary since the publication of the images, many major global newspapers revisited these events. It should be noted that all of this news content is available online, is linkable using social media and can be sent via e-mail, thus further reinforcing and fostering cultural memories. By way of example, Der Spiegel published a story titled ‘Iraq Anniversary: 10 Lessons from America’s “Dumb War”’ (Fischer 2013), while Al Jazeera printed one titled ‘Abu Ghraib Closes, Bitter Memories of Torture Remain’ (Tarabay 2014), in addition to the story written by The New York Times Editorial Board, ‘Abu Ghraib, 10 Years Later’ (2014).

With regard to temporality, explanations of visual cultural memory can be both backwards and forwards looking. For Annette Kuhn, memory work is retrospective, involving an ‘active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude toward the past’ (Kuhn 2007, 284). Meanwhile, Jose van Dijck analyses cultural memory by considering what may be ahead of the moment of capture, claiming that visual cultural memories are created for future reference (2008, 59). Thus, photographs simultaneously provide a visible reminder of something that has previously occurred, in addition to rendering images with intentional existence in the future. It seems important to note the validity of both of these aspects: together these two theoretical accounts combine to illustrate the commemorative properties of these visuals. As such, photographs celebrate and build upon a captured moment in a two-dimensional form, with the intention of bringing the past into the present.

One way in which photographs bring the past into the present is with circulation. With specific reference to digital photography and war, Susan Sontag states that digital war photographs act ‘less as objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated’ (2004, 4). Circulation combines with the reproduction of memory as key aspects of the photographs from Abu Ghraib. Mitchell states that the digital medium aids in the production of shared, visual cultural memory:

> The digital camera is a radically different technical apparatus from the analogue camera: it is not just lightweight and easily concealed, but linked in unprecedented ways to a vast infrastructure of reproduction and circulation…[it can be] linked up to a computer to offload its images in mere seconds. We have to think of the digital camera, not only as an extension of the eyes and memory of an
individual, but as linked very intimately to a global network of collective perception, memory, and imagining via e-mail and postings on the Internet. (2011, 123–124)

In so bringing the past into the present, the content of the photographs is easily shared with a wide audience. No longer are the images a military secret, shared only between enlisted members, friends and family. Once the photos leaked to news media, the scandalous images – and horror regarding them – could not be controlled. Mass circulation of these images brought about many differing analyses, some of which were damaging to the reputation of the US military; a public relations problem emerged concerning how the photographs would be read and consequently remembered. One way to offer an authoritative and trustworthy account regarding the Abu Ghraib images is to consider the quantifiable information that only digital photography can provide.

Digital cameras contain such quantifiable, highly traceable metadata. Unavailable to the analogue counterpart, Pack was employed to conduct an analysis of this embedded digital information. The manner in which the digital information was organised by Pack affirms and categorises how these events are remembered (Johnsrud 2011). For Brian Johnsrud, the ability to recall what occurred, in addition to the possibility of being able to forget, is facilitated by the technology of digital photography precisely because it goes beyond that of human potential:

The prioritisation of ‘objective’ digital images over subjective human memory in the Abu Ghraib investigations is a staggering testimony to the degree to which the creation of digital media has established itself as an authoritative replacement for cognitive memory-making, with digital images imbued with legitimacy as an objective tale more ‘accurate’ than subjective mnemonic reconstructions. (2011, 156)

With this, the digital camera at Abu Ghraib not only created the images but also generated data and measurability of the corresponding photographs. These data points provided an air of facticity to Pack’s reading.

But perhaps too much credit is given to digital photographic technology simply because the images reliably exist in memory storehouses separate from cognitive capacities. It is important to remember that photographs do more than act as a mnemonic device. Photographs conjure the past in the present, in addition to carrying symbolic meaning that is understandable through shared, emotional and gestural communicative practices (Sontag 1977). With this, images visually represent something valuable, something that is worth remembering (Clifford 1988, 223). To restate, the gestures of pride and accomplishment contrast starkly with the posed naked and limp detainee bodies, and, I argue, this combination ultimately assigns value to the photographs. This cultural information is stored within the images and is subsequently circulated when shared between people – which is beyond the captured digital data. While the data contain these visual markers, the data in-and-of-itself cannot interpret cultural symbols. In short, the data cannot tell us how to feel, or what to think, when we look at the photographs. On one hand, the photographs mean things to people; on the other hand, the data is a mark of computerised processes. As viewers of the photographs, we are meant to understand the images according to common photographic practices, not to see the digitised numeric codes that make up the contents of the digital frames. As such, the cultural practices – overlooked by pack – are what reinforce the commemorative or trophied properties of the Abu Ghraib images.

**Meaning Making and Trophy Making**

War and photography are interlinked cultural practices. With its viewfinder, the camera brings visibility to the field of war (Virilio 1989, 64), and, consequently, often has been used as a way to commemorate soldiers’ efforts by creating visual ‘trophies’ (Struk 2011, 18). Such a combined history seems to reinforce my argument here that the role of the photo in war can act as trophy, which is further reinforced by the cultural practice of soldiers’ posing with proudful expressions. Moreover, photographic trophies have become even more important with the passage of time. In part because the practice of collecting enemy items from the battlefield is largely forbidden under military law (Akinsha 2010, 258; Cashin 2011, 350), and the ubiquity of the digital camera in post 9/11 wars, the soldier can effortlessly capture combat artefacts in pictorial form (Anden-Papadopoulos 2009; Kennedy 2009). Yet, these personal objects are not always innocuous. When the photograph is itself the trophy, whereby an enemy Other is captured within the frame, this body comes to reflect a conquerable, inanimate object.

To explain further, the trophy represents success, and the act of looking at the trophy might conjure pride in the viewer if they identify with those involved in the creation of the trophied object. Wendy Kozol describes this identification with the battlefield souvenirs from Abu Ghraib, referring to the photos as ‘memory-objects’ (2012, 30); just as Assmann states that photos can themselves be ‘memory objects’ or ‘figures of memory’.
Specifically, Kozol asserts that the images conjure pride and prowess made visible within the frame: ‘The Abu Ghraib photographs function as trophies in which smiling American soldiers proudly display their prowess to the camera as they stand over the naked bodies and hooded or obscured faces of Iraqi prisoners’ (30). With reference to visuality and colonial history, some refer to the photos from Abu Ghraib as trophies, naming them ‘trophies of accomplishment’ (Sontag 2004, 4; Tucker and Triantafyllos 2008, 95). While this statement is redundant, as something that is a trophy clearly symbolises accomplishment, it nevertheless reinforces the level of importance imbued with such a title. For a trophy to be a trophy, a particular meaning must be ascribed to the object itself. In the case here, the photographs are the trophied objects in question.

As mentioned previously, Pack is uninterested in what motivated the photography, though to consider the associated cultural practices allows for a better understanding of possible meaning attribution, and thus allows for the consideration of why the photographs were captured at all. Pack takes for granted that his decisions cannot be scrutinised by civilians because of an assumed, lack of similar beliefs and personal experience, which is always already beyond the lacking of a structural way for civilians to address Pack’s comments. With reference to the formation of personal viewpoints, Murray Edelman states that people react to information from their previously formed political beliefs that draw from their own knowledge base and background (Edelman 1998). With this, highly socialised military members might certainly view the events through a particularly different lens than civilians. Along with the statement that he viewed the images as factual documents, Pack suggests that prior military involvement is necessary in order to interpret the photos in an unbiased manner – which is itself indicative of an impartiality that favours a particular point of view. Pack also seems to proclaim the existence of a single meaning with regard to the photographs that, technically, could have multiple if not endless meanings, as Peircian visual semiotics would suggest. Adding to this sentiment, Pack abhors that the military personnel were foolish enough to take pictures, yet he justifies their behaviour by claiming that combat alters what one might perceive as normal or humane treatment of others. One could paraphrase Pack’s account that the criminality rests in the act of photographic capture, not the events themselves. To smile at the enemies’ pain is perhaps customary and is possibly even an aspect of a soldier’s job when enhanced interrogation tactics are used; to take pictures of these events is ‘stupid’ (Morris 2008, 00:15:55).

What Pack does not account for are the possible purposes of taking these photographs. Generally speaking, taking pictures offers the ability to commemorate the efforts of military personnel by way of producing pictorial representations, or trophies, whether featured military members are at rest in ‘khaki portraits’ or are engaged in active combat. In any case, photographs make meaning visible. It could be argued that herein rests the motivation of photographic capture: the smiles and thumbs-up gestures at Abu Ghraib are not simply suggestive. Instead, the meaning of these gestures is definitive, via social protocol and practice, whether or not Pack declares these embodiments to be factually relevant when assessing possible abuse.

CONCLUSIONS

War photographs, particularly those taken as trophies, are rife with sentiment. The images from Abu Ghraib are intentional representations embedded with emotion, which can be used to recall a past event when viewed in the present. The ease with which these digital photographs can be conjured couples their contents, of the naked and shamed bodies of the detainees and the smiles of the American military personnel. With this, the capabilities of digital photography, not just the photographs themselves, are used to commemorate the violent acts captured therein.

Pack claims to only report, ‘what’s in the picture’. Even so, emotions are visible in the photographs. Pack contradicts himself with the dismissal of emotion, claiming irrelevancy. First, he rejects visible emotion when making a truth claim. Second, he justifies some of what occurs in the photographs by claiming that one must understand the gruelling reality of war, indicating a tacit assumption that putting a prisoner of war ‘through discomfort’ is a normative practice (Morris 2008, 1:28:10). Perhaps for Pack, while emotions do exist in combat, it is important to disregard them so as to fulfil one’s austere duties as a soldier. But these soldiers were not unemotionally austere. Instead, they were all smiles. What Pack discounts is perhaps the ultimate explanation of the smiles: it is customary to grin in the presence of a camera, to ‘say cheese’. As subjects before a camera in various and numerous moments, we are asked to smile, whether or not we want to. Such socialisation makes possible the belief that one might grin before any camera, regardless of the activities in which we are asked to partake. This does not mean that we are mere puppets or Pavlovian dogs, but rather that we are accustomed to...
this cultural protocol. Without intervention or critical analysis, we might engage in the custom of smiling for the camera out of habit. Posing for photographs while at war, even when the moments feature abuse, is seemingly not exempt from this customary practice. But it is possible that is a copout, a potential misreading of the full context of the events depicted within the photographs. What can actually be seen is striking: perhaps the participating US military members chose to be remembered the very way they presented themselves.

NOTES

[1] The official US military term for what occurred in some of the photographs was ‘abuse’, though to many (myself included), some of the images depict acts that deserve the more strongly worded term ‘torture’. Pack uses the term ‘abuse’; for clarity and consistency, that is the word that will appear in this article.

[2] I am relying upon the American tradition of semiotics developed by Charles Sanders Pierce. Generally speaking, this method allows for a focus not on language as a sign system (as with European-Saussurean semiotics), but instead on the logics of meaning and knowledge production. See Moriarty (1996) for more.

[3] The images are viewable at antiwar.com, if not at multiple sites, which include those beyond which I have analysed here. In some cases, there are multiple photographs that resemble the descriptions I use here, which actually aids my case: the images are iconic, self-referential and are symbolic of the entirety of photographic acts at Abu Ghraib. As part of my argument is the ease to which these images can be recalled, both in the minds of viewers as well as online, the images will not be seen here. Though I do wish to cite that advertising the disreputable endeavours of the participating US military personnel is perhaps useful in further highlighting the ramifications of their ill conduct, publishing these images here would be yet another photographic act that could further humiliate the prisoners.

[4] While Harman declares, on the one hand, that she took the photos to expose to the world the wickedness of the US military, on the other hand, she claims to have smiled for the photos because it was simply the polite thing to do (Morris 2008, 1:02:10). The latter of which here reinforces the social protocol surrounding posing in photographs.

REFERENCES


What remains of Abu Ghraib?


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