THE ABU GHRAIB SCANDAL: VISUAL PERFORMANCES OF AMERICAN POWER

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Sociology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

July 2006

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ABSTRACT

On April 28, 2004, disturbing photographs capturing the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers were aired on the CBS news program “60 Minutes II” (Levi Strauss, 2004: 87). The photographs depicted events that took place in October 2003 at the Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad, Iraq. The presentation and preservation of the acts on film served as a “public ritual of mortification and a visual marker of humiliation” (Giroux, 2004: 790) of the detainees by the American military. This analysis supplements the wealth of information on the transmission of ideologies through discourse with a focus on visual representation, specifically with regards to the Abu Ghraib scandal, but also in the broader context of the war on Iraq. The American state, military and media were complicit in the production and circulation of the myth of freedom and democracy in order to garner and preserve public support for the war. I explore how the ideological justifications leading up to the war were depicted through particular details in the photos and how these became subject to later debate and discussion in the aftermath of world-wide circulation. According to court testimonies of the soldiers, the images were circulated around the Abu Ghraib prison to function as sources of psychological humiliation and intimidation. While the images themselves do not prove or disprove that acts of physical torture took place, I contend that the images visually demonstrated how the building of the United States as an empire was predicated on gendered, sexualized and racialized power. I have chosen two of the most notorious photographs in the scandal and deconstructed them using Roland Barthes’ (1981) trick effects to unveil the intersections of these systems of power. I also analyze how the constructed image of the war as a showdown between good and evil was loaded with hidden racialized, gendered, and religious categories of knowledge. The distribution of the photographs within the global sphere revealed the ideological meanings behind the production of the images and also exposed the strategies the state and media utilized to preserve the myth of democracy and freedom.
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The Abu Ghraib prison was built in the 1960's approximately twenty miles west of Baghdad and was used by Saddam Hussein for the torture and execution of dissidents. In August 2003, the prison was taken over by the United States and was re-opened to hold detainees captured by American and Coalition forces (Gregory, 2004a: 317). On April 28, 2004, disturbing photographs capturing the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of American soldiers were first aired on the CBS news program "60 Minutes II" (Levi Strauss, 2004: 87). The photographs depicted events that took place in October 2003 and showed soldiers kneeling on and punching prisoners, smiling while posing with a dead body and forcing detainees to simulate and perform sex acts on each other. Detainees were also made to wear women's underwear on their heads and one in particular was made to walk around in front of the recruits while covered in feces. These "interrogation procedures" were ostensibly performed on prisoners in the hopes of bringing the military closer to apprehending leaders of the opposing forces. These images provoked strong emotional reactions in viewers all over the world because the presentation and preservation of the acts on film served as a "public ritual of mortification and a visual marker of humiliation" (Giroux, 2004: 790) of the Iraqi prisoners by the American military.

While there is an abundance of recent scholarship exploring the structures of command, conditions and systems of power which allowed these violent acts to take place (Danner, 2004, Gregory, 2004b, Hersh, 2004, Razack, 2005, Sontag, 2004, Zizek, 2004b), the images themselves have not been dissected to expose the underlying ideologies which enabled them to function as instruments of repression. This analysis seeks to supplement the wealth of information on the transmission of ideologies through
discourse with a focus on visual representation, specifically with regards to the Abu Ghraib scandal, but also in the broader context of the war on Iraq. I will not be exploring the economic and political agendas of the United States in much depth and detail. Rather, I am interested in exploring how the ideological justifications leading up to the war were depicted through particular details in the photos and how these became subject to later debate and discussion in the aftermath of their world-wide circulation. The ideologies that motivated the production of the Abu Ghraib photographs were hidden or distorted by the state and the media. Therefore, it is best to situate this analysis in the realm of visual culture. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) indicates, vision is socially constructed in that we, as visual subjects, are only permitted to see what societal power structures want us to see. He argues that the analysis of the field of visual culture “entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked” (Mitchell, 2005: 343).

Mitchell explains that the pictorial turn is a “widely shared notion that visual images have replaced words as the dominant mode of expression in our time” (2005: 5). It also involves a “rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourses, bodies and figurality” (Mitchell, 1994: 16). Pictorial representation has always existed but with the global reach of the media and its ability to reproduce and transmit images instantaneously, the power of imagery is now stronger than ever before. In the current age of the pictorial turn, images are constantly disseminated through a variety of technological devices such as Ipods, cell-phones, e-mail, television and movie screens. The ideologies behind the production of images are able to reach us in countless ways and undoubtedly affect our unconscious. Therefore,
this analysis has present-day implications because it illustrates the importance of interrogating the meanings behind the production and circulation of images in the media.

The acts depicted in the Abu Ghraib images provoked emotions of disgust, embarrassment and horror. Why were these particular images so shocking? Was it because they appeared to capture the perpetration of violent acts or was it because they revealed certain ideologies that were hidden from the public? What relationship do the state and the media have in the development and reproduction of ideologies? What role do systems of power such as gender, race, sexuality and culture play in creating the effects of these images or more importantly in the production of American empire? How does the circulation of imagery in different institutional contexts affect the power of images? This analysis seeks to shed some light on these issues.

In Part I, I discuss the development of the myth of freedom and democracy by the American state and military to justify action in Iraq. The production of this myth was centered around the liberation of Iraq from the tyrannical regime of Saddam Hussein and the importance of initiating a pre-emptive strike against terrorists. As a result, American soldiers were seen to occupy an elevated status as heroic bearers of freedom and democracy. The state, military and media were all complicit in the framing of this ideology in order to garner and to preserve public support for a war that has become increasingly unpopular.

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002) argues that in a culture of visuality, we must learn to see the intersection of power with images. Therefore, it is important to deconstruct visual images to reveal their underlying ideologies. While the images themselves do not prove or disprove that acts of physical torture took place, I contend that the Abu Ghraib
photographs visually demonstrated how the building of the United States as an empire was predicated on gendered, sexualized and racialized systems of power. Roland Barthes provides a useful starting point for the analysis of the visual as he indicates that photographs are comprised of "two messages: a denoted message...and a connoted message (1985: 6). Denotation refers to the literal and descriptive elements of a photograph as established through the trick effects of aestheticism (arrangement, materiality and composition), the use of poses and the presence and/or absence of objects (Barthes, 1985: 9). In Part II, I compare and contrast two of the most infamous images of the scandal at the level of denotation by using these trick effects to explore how racialized, gendered, and sexualized intersections of power were consolidated. I have chosen these two specific images because they were the most notorious, widely disseminated and heavily debated images in the scandal. These photos were the subjects of intense focus during legal proceedings, including the prosecution of the soldiers. In addition, I will explore the role of circulation and how the movement of these images helped to transmit and reveal the ideological meanings in the prison and within the global media.

Part III of this paper will explore the connotative message or the overall meaning conveyed to the global viewer through the denotative elements in these photos as it became evident through their wider circulation. This section will therefore analyze how the constructed image of the war as an action-packed showdown between good and evil was also loaded with hidden racialized, gendered, and religious categories of knowledge. The distribution of the images within the global media sphere, I argue, revealed some of
the strategies the state and media utilized in order to preserve the myth of democracy and freedom.

**Part I – The Iraq War and the American News Media**

The decision by the United States to declare war on Iraq on March 19, 2003 was made possible through the unity of what Louis Althusser refers to as the repressive state apparatus (RSA). It is composed of the government, the administration and the army (1971: 143-145). In his article “Iraq’s False Promises,” Slavoj Zizek (2004) argues that the Americans invaded Iraq because of economic and political interests in its vast oil resources. If the Americans were able to defeat Saddam Hussein and control these resources, it would help boost the U.S.’s slumping economy and “signal unconditional U.S. hegemony” to the world (Zizek, 2004:4). The U.S. engaged in unilateral action when it proceeded with the war despite strong disapproval from the United Nations. In doing so, it demonstrated that it was working as an empire and was motivated by “a deeply held belief in the need to and the right to dominate others for their own good, others who are expected to be grateful” (Razack, 2004: 10). By waging war on Iraq, the United States effectively announced to the world that it was now working to “shape events rather than react to them” (Giroux, 2004: 791). In essence, the attack was an attempt to establish and maintain the place of the United States in the top echelon of the global order.

It is important to remember that although the American RSA operated as an organized and powerful whole, it could not function without the support of its citizens. The RSA viewed the declaration of war on Iraq as essential in order to increase the strength and wealth of the American nation. However, the majority of the American
public disagreed with this view due to the costly use of violent force and the certain loss of both American and Iraqi lives. Because the RSA was ultimately accountable to the citizens that put them in power, justifications were necessary to conceal the true intentions of the war and to gain public approval and cooperation. Zizek (2004a) argues that these ideological justifications included claims that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that if he was not defeated immediately, he would pair up with Al Qaeda forces to inflict further devastating attacks on American soil. However, in the absence of clear evidence of the existence of these weapons, the main reason put forth was that there was a sacred duty to bring freedom and democracy to those nations subjected to tyranny and oppression, including (and especially) Iraq. In effect, the Americans marketed the war as a civilizing rescue mission supported by a myth of freedom and democracy. Therefore, pre-emptive strikes on the country were justified in order to destabilize existing regimes of terror and to “free” the people of Iraq. A sense of urgency was established so that action had to be taken as soon as possible without going through the normal international and domestic system of checks and balances. The importance of immediate action was captured in the declaration that the United States was in a “state of emergency,” especially following the attacks of September 11, 2001. In essence, the conflict in Iraq was justified as a “state of exception” in which the country could be invaded without the sanction of the United Nations. Derek Gregory citing Giorgio Agamben notes that this “state of exception” was a space in which “law suspended itself, its absence falling over a zone not merely of exclusion but a zone of abandonment” (2004b: 319). The designation of Iraq as such a
space paved the way for the legal and political marginalization of the Iraqi people by the American RSA.

Although the RSA functioned primarily through repression and violence, the production and circulation of ideology was also important to ensure its continued existence (Althusser, 1971: 145). In order to construct and maintain the image of the RSA as an ethical body of power while also appearing to be accountable to American citizens, the United States interpellated the assistance of the communications ideological state apparatus (ISA) to help create and perpetuate this ideology (Althusser, 1971: 143). This particular ISA is what we call the media. With the aid of the media, multiple images of the United States as a liberating, moral and benevolent nation were projected and circulated. In addition, the media helped to develop and advance the ideological justifications of the war and also assisted in the interpellation of citizens as visual subjects. Noam Chomsky argues that the media serves a “societal purpose.” Through “state education,” its purpose is to “train the minds of people to a virtuous attachment to their government and to the arrangements of the social, economic and political order” (1989: 13). The media is also responsible for the framing and highlighting of specific issues while limiting the expression of others. For this reason, the media served as a vital tool of the RSA.

It is important to explore the supportive and symbiotic connection between the media and the RSA and how they are united in their goal of replicating the same ideology. Chomsky has re-formulated Althusser’s model of the RSA and ISA to include what is called in Marxist terminology, the relations and forces of reproduction, which can be abbreviated as RFP. This consists of business corporations, advertising agencies and
other economic enterprises. In this re-formulation, the ISA affects and is affected by both the RSA and the RFP. Chomsky claims that media corporations depend on government ties for the granting of licenses and advertising franchises and also for “diplomatic support for their rights to penetrate foreign cultures with U.S. commercial and value messages” (2002: 13). The media also relies on the government to ratify policies that are conducive to producing a good business environment in which their outlets can thrive. Because media corporations require licenses and funding to stay competitive in the industry, they rely on the state and other business corporations (economic forces and relations of production) for support. In turn, the media protect their own interests by cultivating relationships with political and private sectors through lobbying and other expenditures and by ensuring that their policies support the interests of these parties (Chomsky, 2002).

The media’s framing of the Iraq war shifted the focus away from the ways in which private corporations and contractors benefited from the war through the manufacturing of military equipment as well as in the harvesting of oil resources. Business corporations and the state, in turn, also needed the media to attract suitable audiences with which to advance their interests. It is clear that ideology cannot exist without an apparatus (Althusser, 1971: 166). The media, then, helped to create and perpetuate necessary illusions that serve government and corporate interests and is thus doubly dependent on the repressive state apparatus and on economic relations and forces of production. It is pertinent to note that the successful transmission of ideology was dependent on the appearance of the media as an independent and objective platform that American citizens could also use to protest the actions of the RSA and private corporations. In effect, the
media had to deny its relation to the RSA and the RFP in order to gain the trust of the public.

A key part in the construction of the myth of democracy and freedom for the American RSA was to create a sense of collective identity and belonging among its citizens who shared these state goals. This is the interpellative function of ideology. Althusser indicates that the interpellation or hailing of subjects, or in this case, of the American citizens, occurs through the “mirror structure of ideology” (1971: 181). The effectiveness of the RSA’s ideology rests in its ability to enable the subject to see its own reflection within the functioning of the apparatus. In this case, it required the interpellation of individuals as patriotic subjects, their subjection to the army, the mutual recognition of these subjects by the military and by one another, and finally each subject’s recognition of him or herself. The belief generated from this ‘mirror structure’ was “that on the condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly; everything will be alright” (Althusser, 1971: 181). American citizens needed to see their reflections in the intentions of the military for the RSA’s ideology to be successful. They had to see the soldiers as embodying American values and realize that they were going to battle so Americans could retain their rights and way of life. In effect, if American citizens condemned the military and its “noble intentions,” they were denouncing their own identity as Americans. The intended outcome of this mirroring structure was to create a resurgence of nationalism and patriotism so that everyone would be united under one shared identity and move towards a common goal. In this case, the common objective was winning the war and ensuring the stability of a new world order.
With the media's help, the RSA established the myth of freedom and democracy with the figure of the American soldier leading the way. It is important to recognize that the development of this mythology worked as a form of ideology. The government and military have been creating what J. Justin Gustanis calls an “American monomyth” which "describes an account of a pure, brave, dedicated American hero who defeats evildoers by virtue of his superior skills and high moral purpose" (1993: 23). By embarking on this sacred mission, the soldiers were also represented as performers of God's work and thus worthy of national as well as global respect and support. Zizek (2004a) argues that the U.S. saw American-style freedom as God's gift to humanity and also saw itself as God's instrument. By manufacturing these “divine” roles, the American government and military also attempted to establish themselves simultaneously as global priests and policemen.

If the fantasy of the American hero and its goal of protecting the world were to become a reality, forces of evil would have to be located within a particular space and within a particular population. The Bush administration identified Iraq as a site of terror and argued that the violence of this regime would potentially spread if the “problem” was not swiftly contained. The first step in constituting, opposing and casting off the “other” was to establish a clear definition or image of who the “other” was (Gregory, 2004a). The ideological creation of the image of the United States as a hyper-power thus required the construction of a hyper-villain in order to reinforce its positional superiority.

In order to sculpt an image of the Iraqis as hyper-villains, the U.S. evoked imaginative geographies in which the oppositional battle between the Americans and the Iraqis during the war would be staged. Edward Said states that imaginative geographies
work by “constructing and calibrating a gap between the two by designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Gregory, 2004a: 17). In this case, “our” space was marked by positive characteristics that distinguished “us”, from “them” or the Iraqis. Strong and persistent rhetoric was used by President Bush and his administration to create divisions between “us” and “them,” “civilization” and “barbarism,” “good” and “evil” in an effort to locate the enemy (Gregory, 2004a). These imaginative geographies were used by the RSA as part of a governing ideology, albeit not the only ones. As I point out in part III, there were other hidden systems of power and thus other ideological strategies at work.

The war was constructed as a mission to save the innocent Iraqi people from the oppressive, overly patriarchal, volatile and violent regime of Saddam Hussein. Those who chose not to support the “moral” reasons behind the attack on Iraq were constructed as deeply unpatriotic. As such, “any form of resistance to sovereign (read: American) power was perceived as terrorism” (Gregory, 2004a: 140). The American RSA, with the help of the media, created, reproduced and disseminated an archive of imaginative geographies. It is important to remember that the very word “imaginative” indicates that these conceptions were socially constructed, contextual and highly subjective. They were not necessarily representative of the way things were but were merely reflective of the ideology that was used to create them.

The interpellation of patriotic subjects was ensured through consistent and seemingly objective reporting of ideologies during the war by the state and the various American media networks. As discussed earlier, Chomsky’s (2002) propaganda model of understanding media coverage argues that the systematic and controlled choice of stories
and quality of news coverage is based on the inserviceability to political and corporate
interests. The media’s role in replicating and disseminating patriotic ideology during the
Iraq war was evident in public broadcasts of American soldiers handing out toys and
candies to children while Iraqi civilians cheered with delight in the background. Often,
these scenes were staged in order to achieve the desired ideological effects. Importantly,
all of these images of American heroism were interspersed with shots of the sacred and
iconic U.S. flag. Perhaps the most iconic of these images was the toppling of Saddam
Hussein’s statue shortly after American troops stormed into Baghdad in April 2003.
Originally, the plan was to collapse the statue and impose the American flag over
Saddam Hussein’s head. However, troops were warned against this by their superiors
who felt that this action would not reflect well on the military’s reputation. Images such
as these were intended to inspire confidence in the American public and to send a clear
message that the war would soon be over with the U.S. military emerging as the victors.

Visual images that served to tarnish this ideological illusion, such as photographs of
dead U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians as well as images of an American flag draped over
Saddam Hussein’s head, were conveniently filtered out of the media stream. In effect,
there was a projection of a “clean,” fair and legitimate conflict as viewers were prevented
from seeing soldiers participate in any violent or inappropriate conduct that was contrary
to behaviour expected of an American hero. As Gregory describes, the “presentation of
the war was artfully scripted” and while the American soldiers occupied center stage
during news broadcasts, the Iraqi people functioned as “extras” and were required to
remain anonymous (2004a: 199).
What we have seen in the “War on Terror,” including the war on Iraq, is an unprecedented use of embedded journalists within military operations. These journalists have been assigned to specific regiments within the army and must report on the daily activities of the troops, such as the patrolling of the city streets to ensure that they are calm and free of violence. Major news networks often display video clips of these activities during broadcasts to provide viewers with a closer look at the spectacle of war. The state’s motive in allowing this kind of partnership between the military and the media was to instill a sense of accountability to its citizens and to show that they have nothing to hide. The notion of embedded journalists also implied that the coverage of events was neutral and objective, and thus strengthened the scripting and presentation of the war.

Despite the appearance of providing a realistic and unbiased view into the daily life of an American soldier in Iraq, the media’s access to the battlefields and the airing of the material has been tightly controlled by the state. Gregory contends that “the spaces of visibility...were thus also spaces of carefully constructed invisibility” (2004a: 52-53). While many images in the early days of the war were shown to American audiences, there were many that were not. Long range photography was used more so than first-hand reporting to create a “war without witnesses” (Gregory, 2004a: 53). “This was in striking contrast to the live, close-up coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon itself, and of the minute-by-minute attempts at rescue and recovery at ‘Ground Zero’” (Gregory, 2004a: 53). Hazy green footage from night vision cameras perched high on top of buildings in Iraq showed bombings as they took place and were a regular sight on the news networks. News management, under the direction of the state,
had an objective to reduce those responsible for the attacks to “points on a map or nodes in a network; in short, as targets” (Gregory, 2004a: 53). This limitation in perspective allowed the American viewer to experience a position of elevated power; a sense of looking down at the Iraqis. This tactic also functioned to send the message to viewers that the Americans were winning the war and that the military would prevail with the support of the public. This visual technique was also used to keep the myth of democracy and freedom alive since it functioned to sanitize the war and suspend the viewer’s memories of the violent nature of military conflict. By reducing Iraqis to targets, the human connection was severed and it was easier for the public to accept that the bombings were taking place. The media, in this way, served the interests of the state and “framed their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limited debate and discussion accordingly” (Chomsky, 1998: 10).

While the actions of the war were sanitized on television screens across the country, violence and abuse of Iraqis was occurring behind the scenes with impunity. Because the war on Iraq and by extension, the war on terror, was conceived of as a different battle with an arguably more dangerous enemy, the Abu Ghraib prison was constructed as a space in which normal rules could not and did not apply. While Iraq was treated as a “state of exception” in being invaded without UN sanction, Abu Ghraib was treated as an exception to the exception insofar as the suspension of international laws against torture and abuse was justified in order to control those who threatened national and international security. The reasoning was that these prisoners should not benefit from the law since it was they who violated it in the first place. The third Geneva Convention is a tenet of international law which relates to the treatment of prisoners of war. It stipulates
that prisoners of war “are in the power of the enemy State, not of the individuals or troops who have captured them” and therefore they “must be treated humanely with respect for their persons and their honour” ("Geneva Convention," 2006). George W. Bush and his administration found a way to circumvent the law by “defining many of the fighters detained by U.S. troops not as enemy soldiers, but as ‘unlawful combatants’” (Gregory, 2004a: 65). By deploying a different classification of the detainees, “the prisoners of a war on terror were not prisoners of war and were held in a ‘non-place’ beyond the reach of either U.S. or international law, and denied access to any competent system of impartial justice” (Gregory, 2004b: 319). The “urgency” of the situation in Iraq served to license the horrific treatment of prisoners inside the Abu Ghraib prison. Therefore, the Abu Ghraib prison was “a space that [was] at once inside and outside the political-juridical order” (Gregory, 2004b: 322).

The construction of the Iraq war as a rescue mission also fostered unequal relations of power in which American soldiers were given an elevated status while Iraqis were seen to occupy a subordinate one. The degradation of the Iraqi people was accompanied by a firm belief in national superiority and the need to excise these “others” from the national and global space. In effect, the Iraqi prisoners occupied the position of what Giorgio Agamben calls the “homo sacer.” Historically, homo sacer was a position conferred upon those who were located outside of divine law because their deaths were of no value to the gods, but who could still be killed with impunity since they were also outside of juridical law (Gregory, 2004a). In essence, the homo sacer may be dehumanized and positioned beyond the protection of the law and into a space in which the sovereign
decides the exception (Gregory, 2004a). Once placed in spaces of exception, the "other" can no longer exercise control over his or her life.

The military and government structures of command that were supposed to be applied uniformly in the "state of emergency" of Iraq were subverted and suspended in the Abu Ghraib prison. A report written by Major General Antonio M. Taguba shortly after the events became public concluded that "between October and December of 2003, there were numerous instances of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses at Abu Ghraib" (Hersh, 2004). He also indicated that "army regulations and the Geneva Conventions were routinely violated" (Hersh, 2004). The prison was filled beyond capacity, facilities were poor and the reservists were outnumbered. As a result, the detainees "seethed with resentment and riots and escapes were common" (Gregory, 2004b: 321). The prison quickly descended into a state of chaos and disorganization as the poorly trained and unprepared soldiers "laboured under inadequate resources and ineffective supervision" (Gregory, 2004b: 321).

Major Taguba’s report also confirmed that the prison was an "unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest levels" (Hersh, 2004). The Abu Ghraib prison was originally used to detain Iraqi criminals under Saddam Hussein’s regime, but after the war began, Bush began using the prison as a place to hold "terrorists, suspected terrorists, or known associates of terrorists" (Cohn, 2005). In keeping with the notion that Abu Ghraib existed as a "state of exception," "two of the earliest legal memoranda, dated January 22, 2002 and February 7, 2002...set forth a framework for holding prisoners outside the protections of the rule of law and gave the go-ahead for the torture and ill-treatment of persons detained in connection with the ‘war
on terrorism’” (Watt, 2005: 77). The memoranda were approved even though the Bush administration repeatedly insisted that the Geneva Conventions were fully applicable and were being observed in Iraq (Brody, 2005). In essence, the RSA demonstrated its rule through violence and repression of the prisoners. Despite the fact that the International Committee of the Red Cross provided U.S. authorities with several written and oral warnings of the abuses throughout 2003, military officials responded by limiting the number of spot inspections and insisting that appointments had to be made before visiting the cellblock (Brody, 2005).

The war in Iraq is not as simple as the scripted battle between good and evil, as the RSA and the media would have people believe. It is ultimately about preserving the sanctity of an American empire as a major global power. The American empire, like the British and French empires that preceded it, has always been predicated on the intersecting systems of racialized, sexualized and gendered power. The ideology behind the myth of democracy and freedom served to mask this reality on the one hand while perpetuating these matrices of power on the other.

The Abu Ghraib images underscored the fact that the prison was a state of exception and showed how far the RSA proceeded by taking measures to contain and defeat the enemy even if it contravened national and international laws. The photographs functioned to project a direct visual contrast of the dehumanization of the Iraqi prisoners (homo sacers) in relation to the powerful American soldiers. The images were exceptional because they made visible the “racialized and gendered logic of a civilization narrative mobilized to create and recreate insiders and outsiders in the project of empire
building” (Mohanty, 2006: 11). Therefore, critical examination of the photographic images is important in order to reveal the production and projection of these ideologies.

**Part II– Deconstructing the Trick Effects of the Abu Ghraib Photographs**

According to the court testimonies of the soldiers, the Abu Ghraib photographs were meant to be circulated around the prison to psychologically torture and humiliate the detainees (Wypijewski, 2006: 48). I have chosen these two particular images because they richly signify a variety of meanings and illustrate the ways in which the RSA used imagery as tools of repression. Before examining the denotative aspects of the visual images, it is essential to consider Roland Barthes’ basic model of meaning and signification as it applies to what he calls the “photographic message” (1973: 113-117). He states that the signifier may be a word, image or speech act, sound or any material vehicle that is meant to convey meaning. The signified represents the concept or the meaning of the objects portrayed in an image. The signifier and the signified, taken together make up the sign, which is the totality of the word, sound and or image and its concept or meaning. In particular, I shall show how the effectiveness of the images in the eyes of the soldiers and the prisoners as meaningful forms of psychological torment can be understood in terms of what Barthes calls the trick effects of aestheticism, posing and objects. All of these trick effects appear to be quite objective and devoid of meaning when considered on their own, yet together they function strongly as signifiers of meaning. The richness of the layers of meaning within these particular images lies in the fact that some of these trick effects overlap with and reinforce one another. The collective ideological message signified through these photographic images conveys the power of the American soldiers over the dehumanized Iraqi other.
The first trick effect is that of the "aestheticism" that is expressed through the materiality and composition of the images. Figure #1 depicts a pyramid formation of bodies with the white male soldier, Specialist Charles Graner, positioned at the top. The white female soldier, Specialist Sabrina Harman, is crouching in a lower position while the Iraqi prisoners are shown as a mass of naked brown bodies at the very bottom. The pyramid formation is particularly significant because it illustrates the hierarchy of power within the Abu Ghraib prison, the United States and also within the war on Iraq. The individuals with the most power are the white male soldiers, as represented by Graner, followed by the female soldiers, as represented by Harman. This pyramid formation effectively illustrates the secondary role of white women in the chain of command in the prison, and thus in the making of empire. Anne McClintock contends that "women serve as boundary markers and threshold figures; they facilitate the male plot and the male transformation, but they are not the agents of change, nor are they conceivable heirs to political power" (1995: 70). In other words, these white women soldiers mark the boundaries between the white male imperial figure of authority and those "others" that lie outside of the empire. As displayed through their arrangement in these photos, they function to police, preserve and reproduce the imperial empire but are not the most powerful figures within it.

Figure #2 shows a female soldier, Private Lynndie England, holding a leash with an Iraqi prisoner attached to it. What is of particular interest in this image of England is the androgynous appearance that is conveyed through her uniform, boots, camouflage pants and perhaps most importantly, through her short hairstyle. Despite the fact that she is

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1 See appendix
2 See appendix
female, she assumes a masculinized and militarized appearance. What both of these images effectively display is the persistence of the “aesthetic of militarization” and the “ideology of hardness, toughness and hyper-masculinity” (Giroux, 2004: 799-800). Masculinity is often equated with strength and power and thus functions as a core part of military operations and discourse. Femininity, on the other hand, is often construed of as weakness and as such, is discouraged in the military. Despite the fact that females assume a lower level of power than their male counterparts, both photographs send the message to the Iraqi prisoners that even though the women appear to be diminutive and harmless, as members of the American military they still wield enormous power over them.

In many of the Abu Ghraib images, there are implied acts of sodomy perpetrated by soldiers on prisoners and between the prisoners themselves. Razack explains that especially in contexts of imperial men, “sexualized violence accomplishes the eviction from humanity, and it does so as an eviction from masculinity” (2005: 8). She also argues that “to violate a man through anal rape...is the clearest way to assert the power of one group of men over another” (2004: 71). The line between subordinate and dominant masculinity is drawn by the distinction between active and passive roles in the sexual act. “Through the act of being penetrated, the victim...is shown to be weak, vulnerable, ‘female’” while the man being serviced, in comparison, preserves his masculinity (Collins, 2004: 235). In being represented according to this sexual code, the detainees are constructed as an “alien race, the homosexual Other, the unmanly man and these all became the mass” (Razack, 2004: 73). The sexualized nature of the pictures can also be read in the larger context as the raping of Iraq by the Americans during the war.
A second trick effect utilized in the photographs is the posing of the individual subjects. The poses are not "naturally" achieved and they create an impression of the dominance of the American military. It is essential to view the act of posing as a visual performance of ideology. The images reflect the ideological portrayal of the superiority of the American empire over the Iraq. The choreography of Figure #1 is evident in the manipulation of the prisoners' body postures and resembles what Zizek calls a "theatrical staging" or a "theatre of cruelty" (2004: 19). The submissive nature that the prisoners assume through the kneeling pose transforms them into objects that are subject to the manipulation and control of the soldiers. The posing denotes the humiliation of the Iraqis not only because they are naked, but also because they are at the mercy of the soldiers. The "thumbs up" sign held up by the American soldiers and the accompanying gleeful grins imply a sense of accomplishment and feeling of success over their Arab adversaries.

In Figure #2, the posing does not seem as obvious as in the first image. At first glance, it appears that Private England is pulling the leash and dragging the prisoner behind her. However, it is pertinent to note that the image shows that she is merely holding the leash and not pulling it insofar as it appears to be slack. This point is supported in Lynndie England's court testimony that the prisoner was "not dragged but crawled" out of his cell (Wypijewski, 2006: 48). It is significant to note that there are definite power relations at work especially in light of the fact that the prisoner is lying down while the soldier is standing over top of him. The fact that England is looking directly at the prisoner also suggests the threat of constant American surveillance. It sends the message that at the first hint of disobedience, the inmate will be disciplined.
This aspect of the pose also speaks to the greater global context in which Middle Eastern male terrorists cannot escape from the watchful gaze of the United States.

A third trick effect present in the two images is the inclusion of objects to further advance the ideology of the American state and military. Barthes states that “objects are acknowledged inductors of associations of ideas or, more obscurely, of actual symbols” (1985: 11). In Figure #1, the objects include the prisoners’ hoods as well as the gloves worn by Charles Graner. Although the function of the hood may primarily be to disorient the detainee, it also serves to remove identification of the victim by the other prisoners and thus eliminates the individualized notion of the humiliation. The punishment can then be aimed implicitly at the collective Arab population to encourage obedience to American objectives. The gloves worn by Specialist Graner are reminiscent of those worn by practitioners who are licensed to administer forms of treatment to cure illnesses or operate on sick individuals. The gloves suggest that the soldiers are sanctioned by the military and/or the state to enact forms of punishment on these prisoners in such a way that no matter how hard the detainees protest, there will be no legal recourse of action. Alternatively, the gloves give the impression that the soldiers are “curing” the society of the ills of terrorism and anti-American groups through these forms of punishment.

The presence of the leash in Figure #2 reinforces the idea that the fate of the prisoners rests in the hands of the powerful American military personnel. The leashed man evokes images of slavery and also invites “classic dominatrix imagery” (Sontag, 2004). The inmate is being treated like an animal – perhaps even assuming the posture of a dog - that must follow the commands of its master in effectively being relegated to a position that is lower than human life. The irony here is that by transforming them into dogs, the Iraqi
detainees become the very thing that they fear and loathe. This image illustrates Zizek’s point that the prisoners who do not obey are dehumanized and treated as if they are in the position of the “living dead” (2004: 19).

It is imperative to recognize the gendered and racialized significance of this photograph. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the civilizing mandate behind the war in Iraq was also concerned with “rescuing brown women from savage brown men” (2006: 8). Arab men are constructed as primitive because they are thought to be essentially patriarchal. It is significant then that the image depicts a white woman disciplining a brown man. This action is culturally specific because in Islamic culture, women wear veils. As such, it is part of the psychological humiliation to have an unveiled, Western white woman impart punishment on the Iraqi prisoner. The punishment also functions as a civilizing procedure. The message is that you cannot treat women this way in America, especially white women. Essentially, England’s role in the disciplining of Iraqi men illustrates the fact that citizenship in empire is based on participation in and performance of obligations which are “anchored in historical geographies of racial and cultural identities” (Mohanty, 2006: 13). England has to perform her role in order to gain a sense of belonging in the racialized and masculinized military culture of America.

In both images, the jail cells in the background and the presence of the military uniforms denote important meanings. In Figure #1, the subjects are located in front of what appears to be a closed cell door in one of the hallways of the prison. The position of the soldiers in front of the closed cell door suggests to the prisoners that they cannot escape from the prison or from the wrath of the military. In contrast, Lynndie England
appears to be pulling a prisoner out of an open jail cell in Figure #2. The open cell doors of the prisoners send the message that the soldiers have the power to locate you and pull you out whenever they please to impose punishments upon you so it is best to cooperate and acquiesce to their demands. The military uniforms represent institutional power and the fact that the recruits control the means of humiliation and intimidation, such as the leash and camera. In both of the aforementioned images, the nudity of the prisoners is directly contrasted with the clothed American soldiers. In Figure #1, the piles of clothing on the right side of the image suggest that the prisoners did arrive with clothes on but were forced to take them off. The stripping of all articles of clothing is analogous to the stripping of the rights and human dignity of the prisoners.

When analyzing the ideologies of power within the images, it is pertinent not to overlook the power behind the act of photography itself. It is important to note that there is a myth of photographic truth in which “photographs have the power to project images of the truth and can be seen as unmediated copies of reality” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 362). Photographs, especially at the level of denotation, make a claim to being realistic representations of the way things really are. They purport to capture and present a moment in time in a naturalistic and unbiased manner. However, the presence of a camera disrupts the moment and causes reality to be suspended for as long as it takes to get a worthy photograph. It also records the subjective perspective of the photographer at that moment in time and is thus not a purely objective indicator of reality.

An aspect of the photographic myth of truth lies in the space and time that the photograph projects because “in the photograph, an illogical conjunction occurs between the here and the then” (Barthes, 1985: 33). Because still photographs only capture the
occurrence of events within a specific time period, the viewer has no knowledge of what transpired before and after the picture was taken. Susan Sontag recognizes this fact when she notes that “the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses” (1977: 23). When viewers gaze at an image, there is often a mistaken assumption that the actions depicted in the photograph have in fact occurred as illustrated. Therefore, it is significant to point out that although the Abu Ghraib photographs imply the use of physical and sexual methods of torture, the images themselves do not really confirm or deny that torture did indeed take place. Another aspect of the photographic myth that is hidden is the fact that visual images are subject to manipulation, especially in the current age of digital technology and as a result, they are not always entirely accurate indicators of how things really are.

In the context of the scandal, the camera was literally intended to function as a weapon insofar its ability to “aim, shoot, load” with the click of the button was rendered synonymous with the threat of “pulling the trigger” of a gun (Sontag, 1977: 14). As with any type of weapon, the camera has the ability to “presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit” (Sontag, 1977:13). What makes the camera an effective instrument of psychological torment especially in this case is that “to take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or some thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag, 1977: 15). At the moment a picture is taken, the subjects surrender an image of themselves to the camera which is then preserved on film and conferred a sense of immortality. In the context of the Abu Ghraib prison, the use of a camera implied that the humiliation did not stop with the cessation of physical acts of abuse because these acts were preserved in photographs and circulated within the prison. In effect, the camera served as a “shame
multiplier” and provided the interrogator with a tremendous amount of power (Danner, 2004b).

The circulation of the photographs within the prison interpellated two types of visual subjects: the American soldiers and the Iraqi detainees. The images worked as tools of psychological humiliation because they created a sense of iconoclasm among the prisoners. Mitchell states that “iconoclasm proceeds from the...principle that images are something to be suspicious of, that they are dangerous, evil and seductive” (2005: 21). The threat of the circulation of images was intended to encourage the prisoners to give up information and rescind their loyalties to Saddam Hussein, terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, and other anti-American forces. These groups likewise functioned as iconoclasts because they had ventured to destroy images that were important to the Americans, such as the World Trade Centre towers, flags of the United States, effigies of President George Bush as well as the beheading of Western journalists.

The production and dissemination of the images within the jail sent the message to the other prisoners that they would suffer for what they have done to America and if they did not cooperate, they would be penalized. The act of photographing the prisoners and the threat of circulating these images functioned as a form of intimidation for the inmates insofar as they experienced a fear of the dissemination of the photographs to family and friends. In this instance, the camera was doubly potent as a weapon in the scandal because the photographer of the acts was himself a U.S. soldier who had control over the creation of these images of the prisoners and control over the prisoners themselves.

The circulation of the photos within the prison also served to motivate the soldiers to continue on with their duty because they sent the message to the prisoners and fellow
soldiers that the U.S. was winning the war. For the military recruits, the photographs likewise converted “experience into an image, a souvenir” (Sontag, 1977: 9) and became symbols of the triumph of victory over Arab forces. Some of the photos were e-mailed home to family and friends and sometimes they were linked together with sound to make commemorative videos (Wypijewski, 2006: 42). The recruits acted as iconoclasts by targeting icons of Islamic culture in their selection of methods of abuse and humiliation for the prisoners. Mitchell states that “iconoclasm is more than just the destruction of images; it is a ‘creative destruction,’ in which a secondary image of defacement or annihilation is created at the same moment that the ‘target image’ is attacked” (2005: 18). Just as the defacement of global capitalism was achieved by terrorists attacking the target image of the WTC towers, the defacement of Islamic culture was accomplished through the photographic recording of the humiliation of the prisoners.

The American soldiers capitalized on the exploitative aspect of photography by selecting culturally specific forms of humiliation, acting them out on the detainees and then capturing them on film. Mark Danner (2004b) argues that some of the abusive techniques were “clearly designed to exploit the particular sensitivities of Arab culture to public embarrassment, particularly in sexual matters.” Seymour Hersh explains that “homosexual acts are against Islamic law and it is humiliating for men to be naked in front of other men. 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” (Hersh, 2004). These methods of psychological abuse also capitalized on Islamic objections to male nudity in front of women and fear of dogs.
Slavoj Zizek (2004b) provides some provocative but interesting insights about what these cultural forms of humiliation reveal about violence committed in the name of the nation. He postulates that "in being submitted to the humiliating tortures, the Iraqi prisoners were effectively initiated into American culture" (Zizek, 2004b). He compares these abusive acts to "the initiatory rituals of torture and humiliation one has to undergo to be accepted into a closed community" (Zizek, 2004b). By targeting Iraqi religious and cultural beliefs, the soldiers effectively introduced the detainees into the secularized culture of America. The United States is very much a dog-loving nation and as such, cultural objections to these animals were viewed as primitive and in need of change. Furthermore, the sexualized rituals functioned to expel the homoeroticism that was thought to be so pervasive in Islamic cultures and which threatened hegemonic white, male heterosexuality. David Serlin states that historically, fantasies about race and the nation coupled with fears about inappropriate gendered behaviour created the normative and powerful ideal of the white, heterosexual male soldier in America (2003: 154). In order to protect the sanctity of the empire and preserve the male imperial body politic, the policing of gender and sexuality boundaries was required.

All of the Abu Ghraib pictures show the ability of the American soldiers to organize Iraqi detainees into collections of bodies. Ghassan Hage argues that "the collection operates as a space of fantasy, a mode of exhibiting oneself through idealized images of the self" (1998: 162). The pyramid photo is an especially effective example of one of these "collections." When the photographs were circulated in the prison, they served to demonstrate the power of the United States as a nation (symbolized through the soldiers) over Iraq (symbolized through the detainees). As Hage suggests, the specter of
Agamben’s homo sacer appears again: “when people are positioned within such spaces of
fantasy, they are ‘killed’ such that no will can emerge from them; they exist through the

Part III – Disseminating the Mythology of American Freedom and Democracy in
the Aftermath of the Scandal

While the circulation of the images in the prison reinforced the message of the
superiority of the American RSA, the dissemination of the photos in the global media
served to reveal the mythological construction of these ideologies. Essentially, control
over the photos was no longer in the hands of the soldiers and with it came the loss of the
RSA’s control over ideology. In contrast to the long-range photography of the Iraq war,
the images of the Abu Ghraib scandal were close-up and allowed a peek into the
barbarity of the American forces in the war.

Giroux argues that the meaning of photographs is often “shaped by larger institutional
and cultural discourses” (2004: 791). It is at the level of connotation, the second level of
the photographic message, that these larger discourses can be examined. Connotation
involves the society’s interpretation of the overall denotated message made by the
combination of signifiers and signified in an image. The original intent of the circulation
of the photos in the prison was to humiliate the prisoners, yet with the global
dissemination of the images in the media the American government and military were
humiliated instead. The scandal became a controversy largely because it challenged the
American mythical narrative that portrayed soldiers as law abiding, innocent and
righteous heroes. What was touted as a battle against the uncivilized barbarians of Iraq
became a show of the barbarism of the American soldiers themselves as the images revealed the racism and conquest that underpinned efforts to "liberate" Iraq.

The global dissemination of the prison images enabled the interpellation of a wider scope of visual subjects and iconoclasts, including Islamists, war protestors and journalists as well as citizens from countries all over the world, both allies and enemies of the United States. Anti-American groups and Islamists became united in their desire to seek vengeance and punishment on the Americans. Journalists and protestors of the war were also interpellated by the images to expose the false beliefs and practices of the government and military and to question the real intentions behind the waging of the war. Canadian viewers used the scandal to distance themselves from the Americans and to reaffirm their identities as peace-loving and innocent citizens. Ironically, it was now the American RSA which had to disavow these images despite the fact that it ultimately sanctioned their creation. It feared the controversy and potential loss of power brought on by these images because it had to defend its actions in a way it never had to before.

The Abu Ghraib images were particularly disdwell on them in any detail for this very reason. With the distribution of these images in the media, as visual subjects, we are able to see the ways in which the myth of democracy and freedom was naturalized and "not read as motive, but as reason" (Barthes, 1973: 129). Declaring war on Iraq was justified as the only way to protect America and the global order. However, the intense emotions of horror and disgust provoked by these images continually reminded viewers of the atrocities of war which were reminiscent of the Vietnam conflict and the My Lai massacres that are deeply embedded in American memory. The viewer is reminded of the circumstances and similarities surrounding the
Vietnam War, a war that was also fought on the premise of "rescuing" a country from an oppressive regime. In this way, the Abu Ghraib images served to expose and re-historicize the myth of American freedom and democracy. The myth also served to suppress public memory of the fact that weapons of mass destruction were never found while at the same time, they distorted the actual political and economic motives of the war. In this way, "myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History" (Barthes, 1973: 151). In fact, the dissemination of the images in the media served to make visible the ways in which the war was being framed by the RSA.

As we have seen, myth functions most strongly when political and economic intentions and motives are removed or distorted. The publication of the images in the media reversed the roles of good and evil and resulted in questioning the "honorable" intentions behind the waging of the war. At the same time, viewers were confronted by the fact that perhaps Iraqis were not the villains the RSA made them out to be. Instead, they were first victims of Saddam Hussein and now of the American military. Thus, the economic and political intentions of the American state became more evident. It is also in the aftermath of the scandal that we also see the re-politicization of the myth of American freedom and democracy. As Danner (2004a) postulates, the "scandal's images [were] perfect symbols of the subjugation and degradation that the American occupiers [had] inflicted on Iraq and the rest of the Arab world." As a result, it is revealed that what was done in the name of liberty was in fact, the very opposite of liberalism.

As mentioned in Part I, imaginative geographies of good versus evil and civilized versus uncivilized were used to create a binary opposition between the American forces and the Iraqis. However, the Abu Ghraib photographs make visible the hidden racial and
gender-based nature of the dichotomies used by the Bush administration in the war on Iraq. The images showed how racism was manifested as the “elevation of Western culture over other non-Western cultures” (Razack, 2004: 130). Therefore, it is important to look at how these two systems of power are directly implicated in the creation of these binaries.

Edward Said (1978) talks about the history of Western production of negative representations of the East (specifically of the Arab population) in order to dominate and control them. Said (1978) indicates that these representations are always intimately connected with politics. In the war, Orientalist tropes of barbarism, primitiveness and lawlessness were actively utilized in constructing imaginative geographies to demarcate the boundaries, both spatially and mentally, between the Arab “other” and the American soldier. Some of these Orientalist representations described Iraqis in terms that characterized them as a “negative value”, “disrupter”, “obstacle”, “oversexed degenerate” and a “menace of jihad” (Said, 1978: 286-287). In essence, in the public eye, the Iraqi population was represented as a dangerous, unpredictable and violent group. These Orientalist imaginative geographies were used for ideological purposes and therefore tell us more about how power hierarchies were created and reproduced in America and in military culture than they do about the populations they were supposed to describe. What made them so dangerous was that they had become a part of everyday American vernacular speech and thought patterns through their constant repetition and dissemination in the media. As a result, these representations were often accepted as truthful statements by the public. Therefore, Iraqis lacked the “personhood to disturb the frame of who is good and who is evil” (Razack, 2004: 157).
Inderpal Grewal (2003) indicates that what we see in the development of the “War on Terror” and now in Iraq is the production of a new “other”; specifically the transnational racial formation of the Muslim male as a terrorist. It is essential to remember that the static representation of the lawless and barbaric Arab was an important factor in preserving the ideology of the RSA. American citizens were made to believe that terrorists were incapable of change and would forever be devoted to the cause of attacking Western values of freedom and democracy. Grewal (2003) argues that because this figure was represented as a global threat, there was a united effort, on both a national and international scale, to create a new form of racism against male brown Middle Eastern bodies. As already explored in this analysis, only Middle Eastern males were subjected to punishment in the Abu Ghraib prison and this fact reinforces the point that they were the specific targets of American action in Iraq. This racialized and gendered target was directly contrasted with the ideal of the imperial, white, male American soldier. It is interesting to note the absence of the corresponding demonization of Arab women during the war. As indicated earlier, the religion and culture of Islam was represented in the media as overly oppressive and restrictive of the rights of women in the Middle East. In this way, Arab women were represented as victims. This construction functioned to further demonize Middle Eastern men while contributing to the creation of the American soldiers’ status as saviours.

A key construction of difference hinged upon pitting religious belief systems against one another. In his speeches, President Bush constantly used words such as “God”, “saviour” and “Christian” to describe the mission of the American troops. With the manufacturing of the “divine” roles of the soldiers and the “sacred” mission to rescue the
Iraqis, the American RSA re-historicized the battle between Christianity and Islam. Said posits that “Islam ha[d] entered the consciousness of most Americans… principally if not exclusively because it ha[d] been connected to newsworthy issues like oil, Iran and Afghanistan, or terrorism” (1981: 16). As a result of conflicting interpretations of the Koran, the existence of different Islamic sects, multiple practices and periods of Islamic history, it had become commonplace to use a few generalizations to describe the entire Muslim population (Said, 1981: 57-60). All of the information about Islam could not be easily synthesized and so a goal of the American RSA and media was to limit conflicting interpretations in order to support the ideologies of the state. Religious intensity of a particularly violent kind was thus ascribed solely to Islam, thereby generating fear in the public instead of knowledge (Said, 1981: 43). In essence, “evil” Islam was set against Christianity, which was construed as a religion with only the best of intentions. Of course, what are omitted from these constructions are the atrocities and blood baths that have taken place historically in the name of Christianity. Viewed in this context, Americans had little opportunity to see the Islamic world except in a negative light.

In the initial airing of the scandal and the subsequent circulation of the images through television, the internet and print, the media appeared to act as an objective source of information for the American public. Although the media represented itself as an unbiased institution working on behalf of the population, in the end it reproduced the ideology of the ruling classes as well the submission of the public to these dominant ideologies. With the increasing publicity given to the acts depicted in the photos, the moral and righteous image of the American RSA was being tarnished and we again see the cooperation of the media ISA and the RSA to preserve the ruling ideology.
It is interesting to note that during the aftermath of the scandal, most of the news networks concentrated their reporting on the backgrounds of individual soldiers and also on the coverage of their respective court cases. The scandal resulted in the prosecution of seven soldiers, three of which were female. The four male recruits netted the longest jail sentences followed closely by Lynndie England. Charles Graner, the ring leader, received a sentence of ten years and Sabrina Harman received a sentence of a mere six months (Wypijewski, 2006: 40). England received a prison sentence of three years for her active role in the abusive acts (White, 2005). It is important to note that she was given extra coverage in the press and was also given a separate court trial. The fact that England was so closely scrutinized in the media wide circulation of the shocking images in which she is featured (see Figure #2), is indicative of the expected gendered behaviour of women in the military. What was perhaps most damaging to England's position was that in the photographs her facial expressions showed a sense of enjoyment in the abuse of the detainees. Gendered prescriptions in society indicate that women are not supposed to be actively involved in violence, especially violence of a sexual nature.

When it comes to the role of white women in the perpetration of violent acts in the name of the nation, they hold a precarious position. As noted earlier, white female soldiers in the military, such as Lynndie England are placed in a position where they are expected to mimic the violent actions of their male counterparts in order to create an identity and position of power for themselves within the army. Razack (2005) argues that women express white male power and function as its conduits. They also “secure access to citizenship when they participate in the violence of the nation” (Razack, 2005: 11). However, they are expected to perform these functions in a passive manner. As such,
they must walk a fine line between participating enough so as to prove their citizenship in the empire while not participating so much that they overstep their boundaries.

While the furor over the publication of the images was immediate and intense, it lasted for only a brief period of time. The key strategy of the military strategy of self-defense was "to focus on the photographs and to isolate the acts they depicted" in order to shift attention away from the public interrogation of the role of government structures in the abuse of the detainees (Danner, 2004a). The media's selection of material and the focus of its coverage helped to distract attention away from the U.S.'s disregard for international laws like the Geneva Convention treaties. It also drew attention away from the domestic policies of the state and military with regard to the treatment of prisoners during times of war. The media acted as a shield for the RSA and protected it from public scrutiny. These power structures worked together to make sure their ideologies became more ubiquitous than others.

The official representatives of the RSA continued to assert that they were participating in the war not only to protect U.S. citizens, but also to protect the rest of the world from oppressive groups seeking to deny Western nations the sacred right to independence. In this way, the American RSA functioned as an iconoclast because it saw itself "at a historical distance from the idolator, working from a more 'advanced' or 'developed' stage in human evolution" (Mitchell, 1986: 197). The interpellation of subjects was at work here again as the state tried to justify its violent actions in Iraq by activating the mythology of the American hero. The military and government preserved the national identity by blaming the abusive acts on "a few bad apples" who betrayed their country instead of examining the larger chain of command. President Bush labeled
the acts as "disgraceful conduct by a few American troops, who dishonored our country
and disregarded our values." He further stated that the behavior exhibited by those
soldiers "did not represent America" (Danner, 2004a). The administration was quick to
lay blame on the recruits, citing their lack of training in the field and referred to them as
"animal house on the night shift" (Danner, 2004a). In the handling of the crisis, the state
also tried to assert its status as an accountable global superpower by admitting to and
rectifying the weaknesses within the military. The RSA took steps to punish the
individual soldiers in order to prove its accountability to the public. In essence, it sought
to demonstrate the superiority of the United States as a democratic nation.

Military officials activated the class issue in their condemnation of the acts by saying
that they did not know "how these people got into the army," again deflecting attention
away from the responsibility of the state (Giroux, 2004: 789). Much has been made of
the working class backgrounds of the individuals implicated in the scandal expressed
through thinly veiled accusations that their backgrounds "produced the propensity for
sexual deviancy and cruelty" (Giroux, 2004: 789). Many American soldiers come from
working class neighborhoods and are often positioned outside of the boundaries of
American society, yet they risk their lives to fight for the very society that has sought to
alienate them. They are seen as socially subordinate and are further marginalized due to
the fact that they do not belong in middle class society, although they are nonetheless
intensely recruited for the military. In essence, they are expelled from the nation by
being relegated to play a degraded role in its "state of exception."

Although the American RSA punished the soldiers involved in the scandal by
charging them with criminal offenses and sentencing them to prison terms, they admitted
that despite the good intentions they had in going to war against Iraq, sometimes there was a need to invoke a bit of evil in order to reap a lot of good. This is what Barthes calls the inoculation effect of myth in which the state admits to an accidental evil to “better conceal its principal evil” (1973:150). Government and military officials indicated that it was sometimes necessary to give the prisoners some “hard lessons” in order to extract valuable information to ensure the security of the nation and the world from further terrorist attacks. The American RSA again illustrated its iconoclastic tendencies by viewing the prisoners and terrorists as idolators and “objects of pity who require education and therapeutic conversion ‘for their own good’” (Mitchell, 1986: 97). The “education” in question was to be accomplished through the techniques of psychological torture and humiliation. The American leaders wanted viewers to believe that it was only through this “education” that the prisoners would come to see the honorable intentions of the U.S. military and provide them with assistance to capture leaders of the opposing forces. The inoculation effect, then, became a way of insulating the military from international protests and played a core part in the preservation of the myth of freedom and democracy.

The RSA also instituted what Barthes calls a “neither this nor that” strategy (1973:150). In effect, government officials consistently reiterated to the public that the installation of a democratic regime was a slow process. The RSA urged American citizens to exhibit patience since the military was currently neither at the beginning of a period of freedom and democracy nor at the end of an era of tyranny and oppression in Iraq. The statement being made to the American public was that despite the rough roads that lie ahead, we will prevail in the end because we are the “good guys.”
The media also utilized another tactic to move public attention away from the scandal. With the large number of mediums at its disposal and the ability to replicate and circulate multiple images instantaneously, it brought on the saturation of the Abu Ghraib images for the public. As a result, the photographs lost their emotional charge and after repeated exposure, they also became less real (Sontag, 1977: 20). In the age of the pictorial turn, it is guaranteed that new images will soon captivate the viewers’ attention while the old ones fade into obscurity. This fact was illustrated when previously unpublished Abu Ghraib images surfaced in Australian media sources in February 2006 (“New Abu Ghraib Images Broadcast,” 2006). In contrast to the initial airing of the images on “60 Minutes II,” these previously unseen photos were given limited news coverage and therefore did not attract the same levels of public outrage and condemnation. Mirzoeff asserts that the “banality of images is not an accident, but the result of a deliberate effort by those fighting the war to reduce its visual impact by saturating our senses with non-stop indistinguishable and undistinguished images” (2005: 14).

Conclusion

The Iraq war is the most mediated war of all time and as we have seen throughout the course of this analysis, visual imagery is often used as a vehicle for propaganda by the American government in order to influence public opinion. Therefore, images are not often as they seem for they are always motivated by ideology. However, it is important to remember that despite the fact that photographs do not always accurately portray events, they shape the way we think about them and define our responses to them. For instance, the selective media coverage of the war was meant to inspire a sense of
nationalism among American citizens as well as a belief in the actions of the military and state in carrying out the admirable goal of saving the people of Iraq. The ideologies behind these images were designed to induce reactions in American citizens that would benefit the state and military. Myth functions through distortion and as such, we need to be more vigilant. Instead of passively accepting these ideologies, we must look beyond the construction of spaces of visibility in order to challenge the power structures behind them.

What I have sought to do in this analysis is to illustrate what Henry Giroux (2004) calls the pedagogical function of images. He argues that “education as a critical practice could provide the means for disconnecting common sense learning from the narrowly ideological impact of mass media, the regressive tendencies associated with hyper-masculinity, the rituals of everyday violence...as well as from the pervasive ideologies of state repression and its illusions of empire” (2004: 795). Pedagogical practices can encourage critical learning about the ways in which institutions, like the media, work together with the state to restrict independent thinking and strategies of resistance in the public. Education starts by making powerful invisible social forces visible and enabling people to see the underlying ideological functions of imagery and discourse.

The Abu Ghraib photographs essentially demonstrated the visual performance of racialized, sexualized and gendered imaginative geographies. Despite the fact that the RSA used the scandal to demonstrate its status as a democratic and responsible global superpower, the Abu Ghraib images also served as a means to critique American hegemony of the global order. With its actions in Iraq, the U.S. showed that it was working as sovereign empire and saw Iraq as an empty screen on which to imprint its
own image. Since the war commenced in March 2003, there have been everyday violations of civil liberties and countless acts of violence committed under the American myth of freedom and democracy. As both the Vietnam War and Guantanamo Bay have illustrated, the same pattern of violence is being repeated over and over again and is continually legitimated in the name of the nation. The atrocities committed at Guantanamo Bay did not deter such acts of violence but in fact, the “interrogation methods” were imported from the Guantanamo prison for use at Abu Ghraib.

As we have learned from the Abu Ghraib scandal, the national fantasy of American heroism and innocence served to erase the agendas of conquest while at the same time forgiving violence by isolating it to the behaviour of a few “bad apples.” Razack (2004) has argued that in acts of violence such as these, we are all implicated because these acts are done in the name of the nation. It is likely that these atrocities will not stop until we, as citizens of Western nations, change our national narratives and mythologies. American cultural identity has become an unacknowledged system of representations that provides many U.S. citizens with a self-representation that they believe is true (Spivak, 1992: 162). Spivak argues that this hegemonic identity is one that has usurped both the U.S. and the entire globe (1992:162). If there is a message to be learned from the scandal, it is that the world needs to evaluate the power that the American RSA has in disregarding the consent of the global community in order to fulfill its own wishes.

As the aftermath of the scandal shows, a strategy of the military was to focus all the attention onto the images themselves. It is useful to use Mitchell’s analogy of “visual images as ‘go-betweens’ in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings” (2005: 351).
Essentially, images should not be viewed as “exclusive vehicles of political tyranny” (Mitchell, 2005: 350). It is important that we not condemn the images themselves but use them as a means to critique and resist the underlying power structures that create or disseminate repressive ideologies. Visual images are not exclusive tools of those in power, but can also function as instruments of critique and resistance. For instance, a number of the Abu Ghraib photographs have been manipulated through the use of computer technology and re-circulated into the public realm through the internet. Written captions have been added and images of President Bush’s head have been “photoshopped” onto the heads of the Iraqi prisoners. In effect, viewers have the ability to subvert the original meaning of the photographs and re-attach their own meanings to them.

As Michel Foucault argues, power works best when it is invisible and when hegemonic ideologies are able to present themselves as naturalized forms of discourse and behavior (1978: 86). If we allow this to happen, we are contributing to the process of “forgetting” that is instrumental to the persistence of systemic inequalities. George Bush has reflected throughout the course of the war that Abu Ghraib continues to serve as a blemish on the record of American action in Iraq. Despite the fact that the Abu Ghraib images are no longer widely circulated in the media, the images still exist in the minds of viewers and can still exert political and social effects. “Memory in this instance, is more than counter-knowledge, it is a form of resistance” (Giroux, 2004: 806).

While my analysis has proved to be fruitful in revealing some of the ideologies circulated by the media and the RSA, there are limitations to my approach. Further research needs to be done on the ways in which we, as citizens of Western nations, can
contest or contribute to racist, gendered, sexualized and cultural practices. How do we
unlearn these national identities that have become a part of our history? What role does
the academy play in the reproduction or critique of these identities? My interpretations of
the Abu Ghraib photographs are subjective and are a product of my knowledge and
culture as a female, Canadian graduate student. This point illustrates the complexity and
richness of imagery because different viewers can have very different reactions to the
same photographs.

As my investigation has shown, "critical reading demands pedagogical practices that
short circuit common sense, resist easy assumptions, bracket how images are framed,
engage meaning as a struggle of power over politics, and as such refuse to posit reading
(especially images) exclusively as an aesthetic exercise but also as a political and moral
practice" (Giroux, 2004: 791). It is important to dismantle photographs, and in this case,
news photographs to reveal the ideological connotations and myths that lie beneath them,
for often pictures do in fact speak louder than words.
Bibliography


ABU GHRAIB IMAGES

Figure 1: Charles Graner, Sabrina Harman and Iraqi Detainees

Figure 2: Lynndie England and Iraqi Detainee