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Digital Imaging Goes to War: The Abu Ghraib Photographs

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Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib opened in New York's International Center of Photography on 17 September 2004¹. Among the mass of Abu Ghraib prison photographs that had been published since the spring of that year, 17 images were chosen, all from digital sources. Although displayed against the black gallery walls, captioned with white text and surrounded by large margins in the tradition of classic press prints, the Abu Ghraib images were pinned to the wall, unframed. Despite this break with the usual codes of art- photography exhibition, it was clear that these were important historical documents, icons that had “taken their place in the gallery of canonic images, as immediately recognizable as Marilyn struggling with her billowing dress.”²

How the Abu Ghraib torture photographs attained this exceptional status was not immediately self evident. From Robert Capa to Hocine Zaourar and Nick Ut, the authors of ‘image monuments’³ which mark the history of photojournalism were for the most part experienced professionals. In contrast, the images in the Iraqi prison were taken by amateurs for personal purposes. And while this characteristic does not exclude them radically from the photo-journalist paradigm, which does include a few famous instances of photography by non-professionals, such as the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, the Abu Ghraib photographs are the first digital images to be counted among the most celebrated photographs of our time. Moreover, considering that just a few years ago the arrival of digital technology was described as a ‘change in the nature of photography’ supposedly undermining ‘the medium’s inherently authentic nature’⁴, the reception of the Abu Ghraib images is particularly striking. Despite the contested veracity of digital imagery, these photographs were immediately accepted as reliable. Their subsequent function as proof and testimony confirmed their rightful role in the long tradition of photographic recording .

¹ See: http://www.icp.org/exhibitions/abu_ghraib/index.html

² Mark Danner, ‘Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story’, *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, n° 15, 7 October 2004, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=17430.

³ See: Vincent Lavoie, *L’instant-monument, Du fait-divers à l’humanitaire*, Montréal, Dazibao, 2001.

⁴ Anne-Marie Morice, ‘Keith Cottingham ou le sujet artificiel’, *La Recherche photographique*, n° 20, printemps 1997, p. 20. During the same period, Régis Durand says that: ‘indeed photography seems to have come to a threshold in its short existence: technological evolution has reached the point where photography is about to become something very different from what defined it at its inception (particularly with the predictable disappearance of the use of light-sensitive film to the profit of a totally digital treatment of images).’ *Le Temps de l’image*, Paris: la Différence, 1995, p. 7.

Can the Abu Ghraib icons be considered the equal of any photograph? Not according to the many commentaries made after the first images appeared, these emphasized their distinctiveness, primarily their mode of production : the vast number of the images, supposedly attributable to the easy availability of digital cameras and above all their rapid and uncontrollable circulation via the Internet⁵. But while generally correct, these commonsense observations are inaccurate in the case of the pictures from the Iraqi prison. The number of torture images seen had been relatively small and their dissemination took place five months after they were taken.

It seems important then, to reconstruct the history of the emergence and circulation of these images. Their first appearance was in a short ‘60 Minutes II’ item on 28 April 2004 when Dan Rather showed six photographs that had been reproduced on an animation stand⁶. [figures 2 to 7] Two days later on 30 April, Seymour Hersch published “Torture at Abu Ghraib” in the *New Yorker*, and the text was reproduced on the magazine’s website with 9 images⁷. [figures 16 to 24]. Compared to those broadcast by CBS, the pictures in the *New Yorker* stressed the sexual dimension of the iconography. Faced with the subsequent media frenzy, CBS decided to put its pictures online on 5 May - 14 images in total [figures 2 to 15], including one borrowed from the *New Yorker*. The CBS and *New Yorker* groups of images were similar: seven were identical, two were variations of the same image – but the slight differences in framing, colour, and overall look of the images indicated that the two groups were distinct and had come from different copies. Yet over the following days the world press systematically mixed these two closely linked sets into one corpus.

The original appearance of these groups of images, one on television, one in print, were not as independent as it seemed. At the end of the original CBS transmission a text indicated that although the network had been in possession of the documents for several weeks, it had delayed their broadcast following Ministry of Defence directives and had made the decision to show them only under the threat of being scooped. Although essentially selected from same range of subjects that CBS had access to, it was really the *New Yorker* that set the tone for the media’s treatment of the events: Dan Rather’s presentation included an interview with General Mark Kimmitt, who tried to rationalize the ‘abuse’ by describing it as a series of isolated acts, whereas Seymour Hersch’s *New Yorker* article seconded the conclusion of the Taguba report denouncing a system-wide practice.

⁵ See: Michel Guerrin, Corinne Lesnes, ‘Le numérique et internet bousculent le Pentagone’, *Le Monde*, 14 May 2004; Susan Sontag, ‘Regarding the Torture of Others’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/23PRISONS.html?ex=1097726400&en=679fb1b15ae29b34&ei=5070>

⁶ See: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/05/60II/main615781.shtml> (reworked on 5 May 2004).

⁷ Seymour Hersch, ‘Torture at Abu Ghraib’, *New Yorker*, 30 April, http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040510fa_fact

With the quasi-simultaneous diffusion of a coherent group of images and the convergence of television, press and Internet information, all supported by the credibility of well-known journalists and press institutions, a wide media system was in place within a few days. No discussion of the photographers' veracity was ever formulated.

On 1 May, the UK *Daily Mirror* dedicated its front page to pictures revealing British troops torturing Iraqi prisoners. The small group of images (obviously different from the American) were in black and white classic documentary style and clearly taken by professional photographers⁸. Experts and journalists immediately raised doubts as to their authenticity. After intense controversy reported on by the BBC [figures 25-26], the newspaper printed a public apology on 13 May and announced the dismissal of its editor-in-chief, Piers Morgan⁹. A comparison of the different receptions of the digital and silver-based photographs shows a remarkable inversion of our usual understanding of the relation of photographs and truth : the former were judged more authentic. The reasons for this reversal are complex. As with any document, an image cannot constitute sufficient evidence by itself, it can only be an element, a link in a chain whose structural integrity depends on the relation of its parts. The credibility of the Abu Ghraib photographs does not come from any value intrinsic to their production process but rather from the process that resulted in their publication : the criminal case handed on 31 January 2004 to General Antonio Taguba whose report, presented to military authorities at the end of February, had begun to circulate in the press and was rendered public on 5 May¹⁰.

Under what conditions can an investigation that would seriously undermine the army's line of command be made public in a country at war? At the beginning of 2004, the manifest dysfunction of the Abu Ghraib prison made evident in the eviction of General Janis Karpinski was still being treated moderately by the press¹¹. The situation was not favourable to any criticism of military action: Saddam Hussein had been captured the night of 14 December 2003 and the first anniversary of the conflict was nearing. Despite ongoing terrorist attacks, both the government and public opinion wanted to believe the conflict would soon come to an end. It was in April 2004, when the guerrilla acts in the Sunni region intensified, that the perception of the situation changed. A series of brutal images,

8 Paul Byrne, 'Rogue British Troops Batter Iraqis in Mockery of Bid to Win Over People', *Daily Mirror*, 1 May 2004. (The article was removed from the website <http://www.mirror.co.uk> after 13 May 2004).

9 See especially: anon., 'Army photos: Claims and rebuttals', *BBC News*, 14 May 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3680327.stm>

10 Antonio M. Taguba, 'Executive summary of Article 15-6 investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade', report (5 May 2004 version). See: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4894001>

10 See Barbara Starr, 'Details of Army's abuse investigation surfaces', *CNN*, 21 January 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/01/20/sprj.nirq.abuse>

11 See Barbara Starr, 'Details of Army's abuse investigation surfaces', *CNN*, 21 January 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/US/01/20/sprj.nirq.abuse>.

from the lynching of civilians in Fallujah on 31 March to the hitherto unseen coffins of American soldiers featured on the front page of the *Seattle Times* on 27 April, paved the way for a shift in public opinion¹². For the first time, according to a poll organized by CBS and the New York Times between 23 and 27 April 2004, a majority of Americans (52 %) disapproved of the way their government was handling the conflict. The time seemed right for questioning the goals and methods of the war. Originating from within the army itself, the Taguba Report constituted a precious tool for the press. Precise and rigorous, detailing the results of an investigation and its overpowering conclusions in a mere fifty pages, the report became the main source of journalistic analysis. If the authenticity of the photographs was never questioned, it was not only because the torture they depicted was effectively documented by the report, but also because the photographs were themselves elements of the investigation. Correlated with testimony enabling the identification of the photographers, the date and the conditions in which they were taken, the images had the status of evidence, explicitly referred to by the prosecution as proof of the charges.

The cornerstone of the photographs' credibility, the criminal case also provided the conditions of their transmission to the press. Charged with maltreating prisoners, one of the accused soldiers, Ivan Frederick, appealed to his family to organize his defence. Among his attempts to mobilize politicians or army leaders, his uncle, retired sergeant William Lawson, contacted a consultant from the '60 Minutes II' show through the website 'Soldiers for the Truth'¹³. Such an exchange was made possible by the troubled debates that had involved the military since the war in Afghanistan, when opposition to the methods imposed by the Pentagon were translated into a 'politics of leaking'¹⁴ of information to the media.

These various contextual elements explain the relative tardiness with which the images began to circulate - the majority of which, among the first to be published, notably the 'Hooded Man'¹⁵, were taken on 8 November 2003. Moreover, given that the characteristics of a digital file guarantee that the same image will look identical under the same viewing conditions, one can demonstrate that the series of photographs broadcasted by CBS and the New Yorker are not identical documents but two distinct sets of prints on paper. The differences in colour dominance, the alterations in framing of the CBS set and the visible traces of printing lines in the New Yorker set all suggest that the pictures used by the editorial teams were inkjet prints or reproductions via a colour photocopier. Far from

12 Fabrice Rousellot, 'La presse s'arme de critiques', *Libération*, 5 May 2004, p. 7.

13 Robert L. McMahon, 'SFTT Role in Uncovering Abu Ghraib Abuses', website Soldier for the Truth', 12 May 2004. <http://www.sftt.org/cgi-bin/csNews/csNews.cgi?database=Unlisted%2edb&command=viewone&id=12>

14 John Mason, 'George Bush et l'occupation de l'Irak. L'effondrement de la droite américaine ?', talk given during the CIRPES seminar, EHESS, 4 June 2004

15 M. DANNER, 'Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story', loc. cit

representing the model of instantaneous communication of digital files by electronic media, the publication of the first images of the Abu Ghraib tortures are the product of mechanisms that can in no way be distinguished from those that have long produced the most traditional photographs.

While such facts undermine our usual assumptions about of the circulation of digital imagery, there are also other effects that denote a new economy of images. One is the ease with which these photographs have become canonical. The iconographic repetitions and exchanges between the press and television channels had already organized the multiple occurrences of these visual documents as news: with the evolution of the electronic network, the Internet became a third actor in this redundancy, which contributed to the production and repetition of such icons. This aspect is particularly true of the photographs of the Iraqi prison from their first diffusion through three concurrent media and, constituted as evidence, inevitably helped the images to become monuments.

Furthermore, the corpus of Abu Ghraib photographs provides an ideal case study with which to analyse the mechanisms of such processes. After the diffusion of the first two series of images, news organizations engaged in a race for more torture photographs. Despite announcements anticipating several hundred or even thousand more images being revealed, the results of this ruthless quest were scarce. Only the biggest media agencies gained access to new images, parsimoniously dealt out by the sources: the *Washington Post* published five photographs on 9 May 2004, including the famous ‘Leashed Man’¹⁶ as well as photographs from the initial corpus. [figures 27-31] That same day, the *New Yorker* unveiled an exclusive shot that also become notorious. [figure 32] It was only on 19 and 21 May that two new images were broadcast by ABC television [figures 33 & 34], followed by a further group of six by the *Washington Post*. [figures 35-40] Given the number of repetitions throughout, the total number of photographs published that month barely reached thirty. There was still a clear difference between the memorial impact of the first wave of images, from 28 April to 9 May, and that of the second, from 19 May 2004 onwards. Not only had the media frenzy faded, the stories also lost some of their interest. While the first wave of images was characterized by a large proportion of sexual or pornographic photographs as well as images of strange and shocking situations, the second wave was witness to a redundancy of motifs, and even a certain confusion. It is clear that the best candidates for canonization were the simpler images (the hooded man, the leashed man, the prisoner threatened by dogs), those whose subject matter is easily identifiable and could best act as emblems (the martyr, the torturer and the victim, helplessness in the face of violence). In contrast, photographs of too many subjects, with too much going on in the background or of situations needing interpretation were harder to remember.

16 M. DANNER, ‘Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story’, loc. cit.

We are left with the least recognized and yet most specific characteristic of recent digital photographic practice to help us understand how these images were realized. One of the most surprising aspects of the iconography has been to confront us with the smiling faces of torturers in the act of torturing. Several writers have questioned the specific situation that enabled the taking of those photographs, without regard for moral censorship or legal prudence. Meticulous answers have been formulated that look at the conditions that make possible barbaric behaviour in times of war¹⁷. Some people have linked these strange photo-souvenirs to early twentieth century American postcards of lynching scenes in which the torturers pose smiling for the camera¹⁸. The parallel seems the most obvious: but how to explain the disappearance of this ignominious genre for nearly a century? This is where the new characteristics of photography must be taken into consideration.

The most striking feature of the shift from a traditional photographic practice to a digital one lies in the disappearance of the photograph's value. A digital image can be recorded or not, kept or deleted, with no effect other than on the space of the memory card. The understanding that an image has virtually no cost is without doubt one of the most satisfying discoveries about this new medium, one that incites users to take more shots. This aspect definitively modifies the way we take pictures. There is a change in the way taking photographs is perceived: the privileged moment associated with silver-based photography is stripped of its aura. Digital photography makes taking photographs free and without cost, as if it was without significance.

At least at first. For this is a transitory characteristic that belongs to the history of photography and marks a threshold: that separating one technology from another. Considering the roll-film camera in 1888, Albert Londe warned his readers that:

'This camera is definitely very practical [...]. We will nevertheless have to make the general criticism of roll film and multiple plate holders that they may lead users to neglect the quality of the image. The amateur who only takes six glass plates with him on a trip will use them wisely and will certainly bring back six well-studied and ultimately interesting photographs. If this amateur has a stock of 24 or even 48 plates, one fears that he will waste them by shooting randomly and upon his return, he will be forced to admit that most of the photographs are mediocre because they were taken too hastily.'¹⁹

17 See: Michel WIEVIORKA, 'Irak: hygiene du bourreau', *Libération*, 13 May 2004, p. 39.

18 See especially: Luc SANTE, "Tourist and Torturers", *New York Times*, 11 May 2004, '<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20C11F639580C728DDDAC0894DC404482>' 20 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F20C11F639580C728DDDAC0894DC404482>; Susan J. BRISON, 'Torture, or "Good Old American Pornography"?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 June 2004, <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i39/39b01001.htm>.

19 Albert LONDE, *La Photographie Moderne: Pratique et applications* (Paris, Masson, 1888), p. 25-26.

This perception will soon fade. The seeming insignificance of taking digital photographs comes from the fact that the new practice is measured against the old. This threshold effect is typical of the contemporary state of digital photography whose access to mass-practice greatly increased in 2003. Without ignoring the devastating consequences of a conflict without justification, one must argue that the recent equipping of the American population with digital cameras played a key role in the making of the Abu Ghraib photographs.

The sequence of events from autumn 2003 to spring 2004 around the images of Abu Ghraib was exceptional. There are few chances this process will happen again in a similar fashion. Its political consequences still need to be evaluated. On the iconographic level, it provides a number of important conclusions. First of all, it contradicts all the Cassandra predictions of a decline in our sensibility to the language of images, the end of their ability to move us and to engender pity. It negates the forecasts according to which entry in the digital photography era would render the recording process unreliable. At last, it also goes to prove, in an exemplary way, that the digital image belongs to the history of photography, a witness to its mechanisms and principles. Abu Ghraib will be remembered as the first event that made a place in history for digital photography.

Translated from the French by Romain Forquy

NOTES

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