The Performance of War Images

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Images of War

ALTHOUGH WALTER BENJAMIN WROTE THAT history would be remembered in image fragments (1982, 596), remembering the Iraq War, at least through western media sources, has meant a process of asking of block-buster news spreads: 'is that all there is?'

War images are selected for their performativity, the momentary concentration of relationship and the indelibility of their effect. For example, the girl running down the M1 in Vietnam, the baby crying amidst burning rubble in Shanghai, or the more recent collapsing of the twin towers in New York, are all images which have left irreversible impressions in millions of viewers. A more recent example of this is the photograph of the statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled down in Iraq in the early stages of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Such images impose themselves upon our bodies through the sheer strength of their visceral, apparently unmediated impact, although it is often the case that, rather than capturing, in their purity, 'real' events, such images are self-consciously constructed. Allegorical as well as specific, these images are chosen for their compression of significant broader meanings through a relationship within a single frame. As Susan Sontag concludes from her discussion of the cases of the Battle of Iwo Jima, the American Civil War and the First World War in her last book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, the making of these images are more complex than the factual reflection of an event (2003, 54-7).

Following the unfolding narrative of the current occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan (and by no means exhaustively) I will examine some of the more well-known images in order to discuss how these war images (some of which are evidence of war crimes) have been presented and from this examination, what can be deduced from the way they are performed. Rather than arguing that these images are fiction, I discuss how the agenda can be revealed through the way the images are used. I then discuss the representation of a particular war image in the performance work of the Japanese contemporary theatre company Gekidan Kaitaisha to show how war images are being re-used to resist the dominant interpretation of them.

Images from the Iraq War

While Philip M. Taylor named the Gulf War as the "first television war" (1992, 7), Jean Baudrillard (1991) regarded it as a sanitised war effaced by the signs of its existence, later likening the way its viewers were stuck to their screens like sea birds coated in oil (1999, 23). Unlike the Gulf War, the Iraq War and the conflict in Afghanistan, although similarly spectacular in terms of the televisual

coverage they have been afforded, have yet to be concluded. Having learned from the Vietnam War that conflicts are won through popular images and what is and what is not shown, the media-managers of the Pentagon, in collaboration with major television networks, opened the war with Olympian fireworks flickering in an ultra-violet night. These scenes were followed by strategic diagrams discussed by retired generals, footage of Abrams tanks encroaching from the desert, rolling along the Tigris River, and later, footage of U.S. soldiers cavorting in palaces and pillaging museums. The iconic images continued: the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue; Iraqi women in the *hijab* cheering; Iraqi children being given sweets by grinning G.I.s; Hussein's dead sons; the close-up oral-examination of the captured Saddam; and, in keeping with his predeliction for speeches on aircraft carriers, the now infamous premature victory speech given by President Bush on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln on the first of May, 2003.

Operating within a bloodless football-commentary narrative on strategists' data screens, we were shown spectacles of the oxymoronic: 'surgical precision', 'planned chaos' and 'pin-point accuracy', reassuring the home viewer that the deaths of U.S. troops were being kept to a minimum, and the war was efficient, even safe, and most importantly, clean. This clinical representation seemed to serve the U.S. utopian (dystopian?) aspiration for a war fought with machines only, a 'clean' war without bodies, on the U.S. side at least, supporting the rectitude of the military policy and reinforcing an argument for the military cybernetic industry.

And yet, as the invasion turned to occupation, as if from a Roman war epic to a police drama, the grand narrative transformed into something more domestic. The Pentagon in collaboration with major television networks had employed a new strategy of embedding soldier-journalists with direct satellite phone-cameras in military units to entertain home-viewers with docu-drama tales of U.S. soldiers in Iraq, gathering raw material for the scripting of an epic war-narrative for consumption in the homeland and around the world. This use of 'new media' has, arguably, corrupted the already battered notion of the war correspondent's neutrality.

The occupation screens like a morality play in semi-real time. Subsequent scenes showed the 'boots on-the-ground', suburban reality of barely-shaving, pumped-up and screaming Imperial boy and girl soldiers from Bible-belt towns on their first interstate adventure: 'economic conscripts' dropped into survival situations willing to do anything they are told. They perform in scenes pre-empted (and prepared) by reality cop shows. Dramatic rescues of heroic soldiers like Private Jessica Lynch were scripted and staged (see Kellner 2007). Nightly images of terrorised, disgusted and resentful Iraqi civilians in Baghdad sometimes throwing rocks and spitting in faces, as fatherly U.S. sergeants in their best coach accents gird team morale through group prayers and reconcile 'hysterical' locals with tough love.

Then, almost as if it were safe to allow complexity into the script, evidence of false justifications for the war began to emerge. It became apparent that the British Government had created the strong impression that Saddam Hussein could deploy Weapons of Mass Destruction within 45 minutes, even though they knew Iraq had none of these missiles (see Curtis 2004, 37). The blame has subsequently shifted to Iran as the provider of weapons (see Porter 2008).

And yet, despite the main justification for the occupation having been negated, and the secondary justification that Iraq was home to Al Qaeda now doubtful, images of ugly suffering and indiscriminate death continued to appear, including the performed images of the coffins, empty shoes, upturned rifles and helmets of U.S. soldiers.

But the inconvenient twist in the story came when childish cartoons and photographs by U.S. soldiers

of degraded bodies in strange fetish-like positions at Abu Ghraib prison were leaked on the internet. Too tempting for the mainstream media to ignore—lest they lose their competitive edge—these images proved an 'ethical' challenge to high-level authority. Internet images such as those of uniformed U.S. soldiers posing in front of what appeared to be charred bodily remains were accompanied by various anonymous postings like 'Shake 'n Bake', 'Cooked Iraqi' and 'Burn baby, burn!', underscoring a perceived discrepancy between the value of Iraqi and American life. U.S. Marines were exposed desecrating dead bodies in Khandahar, sexually humiliating and physically abusing villagers in remote central Afghanistan, and revealed documenting their acts with digital cameras, a ubiquitous technology that has taken the commerce in war-porn, already well-established with instamatic photography during the Vietnam war, to new heights (see Baranowska 2004). However, lest this grunting Marine behaviour be rationalized as a Bacchanalian purging of repressed primal instincts, a 'polis' argument which reinforces the dyad of human and animal, civilised and barbarian, included and excluded via the 'anthropology machine', it is well known that physical intimidation and exploitation of cultural and religious values are actively encouraged in military training to humiliate, enrage and provoke attack from the enemy—in short, the marines were following orders which, *prima facie*, violate the Geneva Conventions (see Human Rights Watch 2005).

While the show trial of Private Lynndie England and others for Abu Ghraib 'infringements' may have been performed to demonstrate something was being done to discipline the aberrant 'bad apples' and uphold 'American values', its effect was to distance the Administration from the incidents, to maintain their reputations and deny knowledge of this standard practice. Recently it has been disclosed that an F.B.I. dossier called the 'war crimes file' was ordered to be closed in 2003 for its evidence of harsh interrogation tactics by the military and C.I.A. (see Lichtblau and Shane 2008; for an analysis of the smiling soldier with a cadaver, see Morris 2008). In short, Pt. England took the punishment for approved although perhaps unofficial policies inherent within the system. But when two U.S. 'contractors'—read 'private soldiers'—were ambushed and killed in the Iraqi city of Fallujah, their bodies displayed in the streets, and then burnt and suspended from a bridge, the U.S. military took the rare opportunity to denounce the moral character of the people of Fallujah, of Iraqis and Muslims in general, and to sack, raze and cordon off the city. However, these images of burnt human husks were no different from those (subsequently shown) of the Gulf War of 1991, with their clothing strangely intact, and still more of these have emerged on the internet during the present campaign. What can be gleaned from the images of Abu Ghraib and Afghanistan being described here is a feeling for the character of the U.S. occupation guided by the policies of the Bush administration. However, as the U.S. military has admitted to planting, buying, and doctoring news in Iraq, promoting paid propaganda ('positive advertising' for the U.S. occupation of Iraq) through public relations firms under contract to the Pentagon, it is clear that there is much that is still not known (Schmitt 2005).

Reminiscent of the Tokyo Trials following the conclusion of the Second World War in the way that the accused were corralled together in a holding pen and 'minded' by U.S. Marines (although the technique has imporved somwhat, as Japanese officers were not provided with translation for half the proceedings), what turned the prosecution of Saddam Hussein and his henchmen—and their subsequent conviction and sentencing of execution—into 'show trial' was its depiction as a story of vindication for American domestic consumption. While Saddam was not innocent, his innocence was never presumed either. Effectively the narrative operates at several levels at once: warns those who might think to challenge Washington's agenda, facilitates U.S. corporate interests and re-affirms the image of the unfettered power to impose U.S. will at the international level, to dispense punishment and enforce its values upon others where it is convenient to do so. On Noam Chomsky's account, there is no double standard in evidence, but rather a 'single standard', directed towards effecting a local subordination

to imperial power (2007, 3). The double standard only becomes apparent if the situation were to be reversed; the U.S. President and his cabinet, perhaps, seated in the dock and forced to answer accusations of war crimes.

Photographed torture at Abu Ghraib, executing the wounded and using chemical weapons in Fallujah, degrading prisoners 'outsourced' to prisons such as Guantánamo Bay and desecrating corpses, and paying private companies to construct positive images of the war demonstrates an occupation limitlessly performing serial egregious choreographies of colonial dominance. It is the confinement of bodies, predominantly of the same sex, in isolated, regimented camps surrounded by foreign, mostly hostile communities, that is naturally fraught, brutalising and creating a fertile environment for extremity. And it is the legal authority passed by the U.S. Congress (2005 Detainee Treatment Act) that has meant that torture—"cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment" known euphemistically as "enhanced interrogation techniques"—has not been ruled out by Condoleeza Rice (see Lowther 2008).

The aesthetics of war images

By means of the portrayal of spatio-temporal dislocation effected by images, war can be, and increasingly is, deterritorialised and detemporalised. While actual weaponry is localised, the images of war in the game room and mass media can exist everywhere and nowhere. While the Vietnam War was known as the 'living room war', this war is propagated on ubiquitous screens in public and private domains desensitising us still further from continuous exposure as we go about our daily lives. No longer representational but strategic, de-contextualised war images are yet another battlefield of concealed messages in consumable packages.

The technology of representations of performed accuracy exploits form to give desired meaning to content, creating a feeling for those in places other than the affected area that the screened display is a mixture of fact and fiction: the event may have already taken place, is yet to take place, or may never have taken place. While certain enlightened democratic propaganda has succeeded in perpetuating the myth of a free press as it pushes a pro-war agenda, viewers who wish to know more have had to develop a faculty for deducing from what they have not been shown.

In the current Iraq War we have seen representation become a shield from reality, maintaining for the viewers a game-like or dramatised environment lived or acted with real bodies. A networked system of eye, viewfinder and trigger has placed viewers on the safe side of the screen, urging fear and framing the U.S. led occupation as an act of protection. While the threat of physical involvement is emphasised by the brutality of the images, our known moral boundaries are being mutated in a time of war: a state of exception. Although the viewer may watch the slaughter of the enemy in shocked, numbed and depressed states, a disembodied allegiance, an identity unlike those who are not seen is created via the shared experience of witnessing the destruction. While the embedded ideology tends to 'conspire' the viewer against those they are 'desired' to oppose, it seems that the experience of witnessing abject images yokes us together, and in powerlessness to directly respond we are unconsciously or unwillingly implicated in the crime, having our sides already 'taken'.

Why have I been shown this?

Images of plummeting bodies, beheadings on video, Olympiad-style bombing displays, gutted buildings, streets on fire, piles of injured or dead civilians are used to 'prove' a set of disembodied and often disconnected beliefs. As Elaine Scarry writes,

> . . . war is a correction of dispute . . . [where] injuring provides by its massive opening
> of human bodies a way of reconnecting the derealized and disembodied beliefs with the

force and power of the material world (1985, 128).

Alternately, when the frame is bracketed, the subject is disentangled from the instinctive reaction, be-coming witness to the craft of framing emotive material with a dematerialised narrative for a distinct objective. The subject responsible is separated from its image-trick, revealing its position within a hier-archical command and control structure thereby revealing the choices surrounding the representation of the material. As Sontag argued, critique of the constructed nature of the war image is not meant to negate theactual event nor deny the importance of war photography, but that the war image can be and is used in support of a polemic both for and against war, or some other cause (see Sontag 2003, 13). Rather, I contend that it is a way to maintain sobriety in the face of revulsion at the fact, to ask: "why have I been shown this?" Unfortunately a comprehensive discussion concerning how images are chosen and for what purpose cannot be further delved into here. Instead I will discuss the possible designed meanings contained within a few selected images.

Despite the ubiquity of camera-use by occupying soldiers, it is apparent that it is not only for sensory deprivation that the real faces of hooded, bagged or masked torture victims have not been shown. Without recognisable identities the prisoners are dehumanized in the eyes of the viewer as the victim is terrorised and the enemy frustrated, the abjection of their position separated from the possibility of heroic martyrdom, limiting the possible empathy in the viewer.

These images not only show a breach of the Nuremburg principles of the United Nations Charter regarding the treatment of prisoners of war,[1] they also underline the 'anthropological' arm of U.S. military strategy. While media exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib has served to compound the hu-miliation and insult to (Muslim) 'insurgents' who apparently are not afraid of pain and death but are morally 'vulnerable' when it comes to behaviour, as if a think-tank had decided libidinal performance art was now *de rigeur* in torture practice, the exploitation of traditional and religious values (via torture performances using nudity, menstrual blood, sexual organs, body contact, physical limits, disorienta-tion techniques, as well as debasing the *Qur'an*) suggests a design to hurt the Muslim male and female enemy along cultural and spiritual lines.

But it is not only captured prisoners who are being manipulated. Unlike Vietnam in the 1960s, where the Viet Cong used female soldiers, we have seen in a number of images that gender issues have been exploited in the 'war on terror' to gain partisan support from female viewers on the home-side by propagating a war on Muslim men and their 'primitive' values. As if Helen of Troy were the rationale for war once more, the images of women wearing the burqa were regularly shown by main U.S. broadcast networks in the (as a) lead-up to the bombing of Afghanistan. Rather than revenge for 11 September, geopolitical hegemony and an excuse for stealing fossil fuels and other resources, the images of oppressed women and barbaric warlords were to ignite a passion for civil liberties, to denounce the Taliban regime as brutish and to create the impression that campaigns in Afghani-stan and Iraq was for social justice, international law and international women's rights; in short for freedom. At which point it becomes apparent that there may be a more sinister rationale behind the use of the images. Ayanna Thompson recently pointed to the oft-elided racial significance of the im-ages of Abu Ghraib:

> Abu Ghraib images were staged and they serve to racialize the Other by codifying the power of the white/right gaze, showing how the postmodern world continues to construct . . . a controlled, approachable, and abject racialized victim (2007, 24).

And yet, while the accessibility of war images of beheadings and torture may reinforce the image of the democratic benevolence of the State through a free media, beside the illegality of torture and

the war itself, the recent arrest and murder of artists, activists and journalists for representing and protesting State illegalities further diminishes the case for going to war for the protection of western democratic values (see Scahill 2005).[2]

And while justifications for torture at Abu Ghraib might range from a soldier seeking to revenge a buddy's death to following orders, ticking time-bombs, stress-relief or live training, it is certain that excessive pain does not produce truthful information. The disparity between the empathic image of ('our') good, noble, just soldiers and the gleeful adolescent indifference evidenced in the images is striking. They betray an institutional character in the chain of command not dissimilar to that of an outlaw or 'rogue state'.

Like entertainment, war-images loaded with symbolism tend to increase the rate of consumption via captivation, over-stimulation, and repetition. By means of a frenzied anomy, combat information manages to 'think the viewer', a form of automated deliberation, forever consuming and forgetting for us in a constant feed. In the merging of war and media via capitalist dynamism, meaning is monopolised. No longer shocked but numbed from too much, it is impossible for viewers with a general interest to maintain the intensity of awareness to see the eyes behind the screen.

Indeed, reportage of this war has become a form of 'war porn' or 'snuff movie', a fetishised violence, an entertainment. The horror (for humanists) is not only the carnage and destruction of this war, nor the 'low-tech' torture at Abu Ghraib prison. The horror is also that it is so well mediated.

The war image in Gekidan Kaitaisha

From *Bye Bye: Phantom* (2003-4) by Japanese contemporary avant-garde theatre company Gekidan Kaitaisha:

> *[i]n greenish monochrome, video footage of the view from the target scope of a plane used in a bombing operation over a village and various other sites in Afghanistan is projected on the back wall of the stage. Soldiers yelling 'Get it!', the breath of the target finder and instructions from ground control are audible before we see the results of their operation in silent detonations on the ground. The speck-like bodies, running, rolling, diving, stopping-still, are like white ants scattering and escaping the massive detonations tracking them.*[3]

The scurrying shadows bleached of subjective qualities are coolly designed to appear as little more than fleeting targets in a video game, suggesting the age of its technical operators. Aside from demonstrating its clinical perspective from its high vantage point and state of removal from the distant other, as if for the eradication of infectious bacteria, we are witness to 'performed witnessing' via signifying network structures or 'smart images' in which a potential crime scene is enlarged with a forensic lens to penetrate and examine 'hidden' truths which impress that there is nothing left to be seen, that everything has been exposed. Displaying accuracy, and perhaps performing 'leaks' to suggest transparency, military-news-entertainment 'consumes' the public as it covertly informs/warns those interested to read more into the image.

Through this footage, the U.S. military have provided insight into the mind behind the eye behind the lens. But then the Japanese experience demonstrated in Kaitaisha's production articulates this as well:

> *[t]he military footage is projected over the body of a Japanese woman in a white mino dress and bare torso standing centre-stage in a square cell of light, as a blank-eyed Caucasian man in a World War 2 army jacket lurches and stumbles on the stage around her.*

The use of this footage in Kaitaisha's performance places sadism, an institution of eroticised violation, in direct opposition to masochism, a non-institutional libidinal mode based on often ethically self-imposed contracts of restraint, belonging to another but extant time. High technology destruction watched by and projected over a solitary body of a thin woman in metaphoric traditional dress demonstrates a radical asymmetry of power. It also denotes the collision of distinct temporalities, compressing that radical cultural and physical distance to nought. It suggests the body of the womanas terrain to identify, 'cleanse' and conquer. Perhaps it also performs the distance between acquisitive and sustainable knowledge, a globalized detachment and extreme localized connection.

For director Shimizu Shinjin, performance is a (literal) metaphor for war, the body is the battlefield, the site constantly being occupied and re-occupied by the image. Beyond the short-lived thrill, this icy, topographical perspective in the bombing footage used in Kaitaisha's production suggests a dull anxiety to assert and confirm superiority *without justification* by exorbitantly simulated omnipresence from a safe distance. Yet having predictably become mired in a non-war fought for 'no (legal) reason' it is a politics of absence and presence which has been and will continue to be the flashpoint in the media wars of representing the real.

As we see in the scene, it is the body as evidence that is presented as posing the biggest problem for war-makers. It is both the (white/foreign) 'soldier' and the (Japanese/indigenous) 'civilian' in the scene who are traumatised bodies of war, existing in stark contrast to those images of inflated, fist-pumping bodies of extreme games/performance/war projected as part of the rapacious desire of a globalised economic machine. Further it is the invisible eye simulating omnipresence through the scopic structure, which is then performed as entertainment and therefore unreal, which is revealed as the 'perfect crime'.

Conclusion

While national-militarist rituals are performed for millions of viewers, the strategically designed effect of these images suggests that it is the viewers who are being encouraged to have an apathetic disregard for their own bodies in relation to the world, if by no other means than the force and magnitude of the images in contrast to the ability to stop them occurring, or worse, to perceive the world as unreal. We might see from the use of the war image in Kaitaisha, that through actively discouraging a respect for difference, being intolerant of weakness and regarding callous competitiveness as a virtue, life (and death) is no longer inviolable. Embedded within this perspective is unimaginable hubris.

Strangely hopeful is the thought that the universal war-reality of bloodshed, bodies and trauma always triumphs over patriotic zeal, replacing it with demoralized disaffection, and suicide, desertion or madness, an overwhelming bodily instinct to escape. And further, that war images and trauma sites are held in new frames in the houses of testimony—museums, galleries, theatres, texts—over which to remember and reflect. The reality of a new kind of war they depict will outlast any persuasive interpretation.

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Notes

1. Applicable provisions include Article 93 (Cruelty and Maltreatment), Article 128 (Assault), Articles 118 and 119 (Murder and Manslaughter), Article 120 (rape and carnal knowledge), Article 124 (Maiming); for officers, Article 133 (Conduct unbecoming an officer). Also the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and, in U.S. law, the War Crimes Act of 1996 (18 USC § 2441) and the federal anti-torture statute (18 USC § 2340A). See Human Rights Watch, 2005, hrw.org /reports/2005/us0905.

2. Scahill, December 1, 2005. Additionally, he writes, "Al Jazeera's real transgression during the "war on terror" is a simple one: being there."

3. This and subsequent descriptions of *Bye Bye: Phantom* are my own, recorded during my involvement with the company.

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