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Photography, Tragedy and Osama Bin Laden

Looking at the enemy

The production of *Antigone*, directed by Polly Findlay, in London's National Theatre in the summer of 2012, placed the play in an oblique relationship with the ongoing war in Afghanistan. As the play opened with the sound of a helicopter whirring overhead, the ensemble appeared to be anxiously master-minding a battle in an underground war room, checking screen monitors, collecting and delivering paper messages issuing from fax machines, criss-crossing the stage with ever-increasing urgency. Then briefly the actors all gathered around one desk and watched a close-circuit television in a rare moment of stillness. On the day I saw the play, the *tableau vivant* produced a gasp of recognition from the audience. It was a visual echo of the well-known photograph by White House photographer Pete Souza of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and the national security team in the situation room watching the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden.

The reference to Osama Bin Laden illuminated something new in the Sophocles play, and – most importantly – vice versa. The stage business, of course, was designed to indicate the war between Eteocles and Polyneices, the action immediately before the play opens. By suggesting a contemporary setting in the 'war on terror', the director was nudging the audience towards seeing Polyneices and his allies as 'insurgents' or 'terrorists' and Creon as 'our' leader, desperately trying to prosecute a complex, ambiguous war. So far, so not unusual. What was innovative was the issue of image-making itself which the tableau raised by its allusion to the situation room picture, and the self-conscious connection between theatre and photography.

The Pete Souza photograph is interesting because it focuses on the witnesses of the action on the television, rather than on the CCTV footage to which they were supposedly attending. Indeed, there has subsequently been speculation on what exact moment of the special operation the national security team was watching when the photograph was taken. What was it that made Hillary Clinton raise her hand to her mouth, to cover her horror, her anxiety, or her cough?ⁱ The central subject of the event – Osama Bin Laden himself – is missing from the photograph; the television is turned away from the image's spectator. The occlusion of Bin Laden continued with the decision to dispose of his body at sea. There was, therefore, no official photograph of the killing of Osama Bin Laden. There was no verified image of his dead body. Polly Findlay's production of *Antigone* made strikingly visible, through a fleeting reference to an occluded image, the invisibility of one of the great 'enemies' of our time.

This essay brings together three central concerns – tragic drama (focusing particularly on *Antigone*), photography (looking at recent images of the war in Afghanistan) and ethics (especially the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Susan Sontag and Judith Butler) – to consider the importance of the visual in tragic theatre, tragic theory and images of tragic events. I want to investigate the relative significance of what is seen in tragic theatre and photography and what is left unseen. The citizen body is formed through the act of recognition, which both tragic drama and the tragic photograph demand, but this act is complicated by areas of occlusion or omission or indeed misrecognition, and also by the underlying political pressures of loyalty or enmity. I argue that the ambiguous implications of spectatorship in theatre and photography are similar particularly in the way viewers of tragic drama or photography negotiate the complex dynamics inherent in the tragic response defined by Aristotle. The essay therefore begins by considering three central terms in Aristotle's *Poetics*, exploring their continuing resonance in ethical and visual theory and tracing their implications in recent photography and ancient Greek tragedy. Firstly, I consider recognition, a term used by Aristotle and by Levinas, which is central to their respective theoretical ideas but which has an ambiguous purchase on the visual. Secondly, issues relating to catharsis raise

questions about the function and purpose of viewing the pain of others. And finally, the role of fear, which is a crucial component of Aristotle's account of tragic response but which is often overlooked, disturbs the account of Levinas's ethics and Judith Butler's 'shared precarity' while it plays an ambiguous part in the viewing and circulation of war photography today.ⁱⁱ These three aspects of Aristotelian tragic theory will then allow us to re-think the connection between tragic drama and the tragic photograph and the complicated process of looking at the enemy in the contemporary war in Afghanistan.ⁱⁱⁱ

Recognising with Aristotle

According to Aristotle, *anagnorisis* or 'recognition' is a crucial component of tragedy, along with reversal (*peripeteia*) and suffering (*pathos*). Recognition does not necessarily carry a visual meaning in Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle's views on the importance of viewing drama in the theatre are ambiguous: 'the plot-structure ought to be so composed that, even without seeing a performance, anyone who hears the events which occur will experience terror and pity as a result of the outcome'.^{iv} But the emphasis upon the visual in Greek drama was striking, both in the architecture of the theatre itself and in the metaphors of revelation evident in the play texts. The Greek word for theatre – *theatron* – means literally 'the place for seeing things', and the stage machinery known as the *ekkyklema* allowed the dead bodies – victims of the drama's business – to be wheeled out and displayed for collective mourning, by the protagonists, chorus and audience. The chorus, nearly always continuously present in the orchestra after their first entry, made the process of witnessing events self-consciously pressing upon the audience's attention.^v And in many plays, the revelatory process of the plot in moving from ignorance to knowledge was described in visual terms. So it is fitting that Aristotle elaborates upon his theory of recognition by invoking the function of visual signs as evidence: the identifying scar by which the nurse recognises Odysseus as she washes his feet or the ritual signs, by Agamemnon's tomb, that the exiled Orestes has returned. (Chap. XVI. 48-9)

It is the act of recognition that Emmanuel Levinas also makes central to his concept of the ethical process of relational living: ‘The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other [...] the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity’.^{vi} Like Aristotle, Levinas held an ambiguous view of the relation between recognition and literal viewing, since the face depicted in art was ‘of the order of the seen’, an ‘object’, and not an ‘encounter’.^{vii} Indeed, it has been argued that Levinas deconstructs or even ‘ruptures’ any concrete figuration or stable signification, and that his force resides in the notion of absolute alterity.^{viii} The ‘face’, in other words, might be understood metaphorically in Levinas as the *concept* of the particular, somatic and expressive identity of the Other which appeals to one, rather than literally and concretely so. But, as Judith Butler notes, if Levinas’s claim is really that ‘it is the face of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it seems that the norms that would allocate who is and is not human arrive in visual form’.^{ix} Butler takes up Levinas to interrogate and extend the notion of what she calls our ‘common human vulnerability’ (30), based upon a mutual recognition of ‘what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself’ (133). A sense of interdependence should be foundational to the constitution of the citizen body. I wish to develop Levinas’s and Butler’s views further by considering the ethical implications of the act of visual recognition both in tragic drama and in photographs that could be described as tragic.

Just as tragic drama reminds its audience of the material consequences of particular decisions – the bodies rolled out to view – so photographs confront their viewers with the need to recognise the embodied repercussions of war and violent action. ‘Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing’, Susan Sontag observed in *On Photography*.^x Twenty five years later, she claimed that such ‘seeing’ is the starting point for moral activism and to ignore shocking images of suffering is to be guilty of ‘moral defectiveness’:

Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a

vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.^{xi}

The empathy invited by looking at photographs should be a crucial component in human rights activism. Without empathy, as Susie Linfield has argued recently, 'the politics of human rights devolve into abstraction, romantic foolishness, and cruelty'.^{xii}

As we look at images of suffering, we are forced to think about the human consequences of what might seem a 'clinical strike' in war. But visual images also raise the issue of the limits of understanding and compassion. As Linfield observes, 'in bringing us close, photographs also illuminate the unbridgeable chasm that separates ordinary life from extraordinary experiences of political trauma. In this sense, photographs teach us about our failure – our *necessary* failure – to comprehend the human'.^{xiii} Recognition, in photography or in drama, can involve acknowledging, or indeed failing to acknowledge, the inability to understand the Other, and by extension the human condition. For Stanley Cavell, recognising other people and the external world would involve a degree of self-recognition or revelation which could be devastating, since it requires a debilitating acknowledgement of our own limitedness. So, whereas for Levinas, epistemological resistance from the Other actually results in an opening up, a 'putting into question', according to Cavell separate existence in Shakespeare is met by an act of deflection or even a closing down in fear or death-dealing jealousy or blind possessiveness. Tragedy results from the 'terrible doubt' which itself covers 'a yet more terrible certainty', that, for example, Desdemona is 'flesh and blood; is separate from [Othello]; other'.^{xiv} The 'ocular proof' (*Othello*. III.iii.365) for which Othello hungers is actually a substitution for the more terrible, hidden recognition of what cannot be seen, the once intact body of Desdemona. The audience also has difficulty 'recognising' or acknowledging what is in front of them, partly being 'shouldered out from our ways of thinking and speaking by a torment of reality' but then partly deflecting it again with the language of analysis or tragic theory or philosophical scepticism.^{xv}

Scepticism can sometimes be overcome with sympathy, but the function of compassion in the viewing of tragic drama or photography is far from unproblematic. The problem can be located in Aristotle's notion of catharsis, cryptic as that is in his *Poetics*: 'through the arousal of pity and fear [tragedy] effect[s] the *katharsis* of such emotions'. (Chap. VI. p. 37). However the phrase is translated – and the Greek is ambiguous – the emphasis falls upon the beneficial effect for the viewer rather than for the sufferer of tragedy. Tragic experience is offered up for the consumption of the audience. As numerous commentators have noted, what is enormously painful for the protagonist in tragedy becomes paradoxically a source of pleasure for the viewer. The dichotomy registers the moment when ethics becomes aesthetics. This process is alluded to in Greek tragedy, in, for example, its description of virginal deaths. The chorus uses strangely aesthetic terms to describe the sacrifice of Iphigenia in *Agamemnon*:

Her yellow-dyed dress streaming to the ground,
she struck each sacrificer with a bolt from her eyes
to move compassion; she stood out clearly
as in a picture (ὡς ἐν γραφαῖς), wanting to call them by name...^{xvi}

The chorus compares the scene to a picture partly because Iphigenia is gagged and cannot make a sound but mainly because this sight is the source of appeal, the attempt to 'move compassion' being the object itself of beauty. The additional irony, here, of course is the fact that almost certainly the chorus did not, and could not, see the scene, since they were, presumably, left behind in Argos. Another sacrifice, that of Polyxena in *Hecuba*, is described by the messenger, Talthybius, thus:

When she heard this order of the master, she took hold of her dress and
tore it from the top of her shoulder to the middle of her waist by the navel.
Her lovely breasts and bosom were revealed like a statue's (ὡς ἀγάλματος),
and sinking to her knees upon the ground she spoke the most heartrending
words of all. 'Look at me! If you are eager to strike this bosom, young
Neoptolemus, strike it now'.^{xvii}

Both these examples illustrate how witnesses on the stage view extreme suffering, and analogously suggest how an audience might respond too. In both cases an individual's

suffering is transformed into a work of art in order to create an effect upon the viewer, implying a certain pleasure in the description and the carefully composed scene.

Viewing photographs of agony can raise issues of distance, indifference and power that are similar to the questions about audience and catharsis that trouble critics of tragic drama. According to Susan Sontag back in the '70s, 'cameras miniaturise experience, transform history into spectacle. As much as they create sympathy, photographs cut sympathy, distance the emotions'.^{xviii} One might think, for example, of the beautifully composed photographs of Eugene Smith, such as 'The Wake' (1950) or 'Tomoko Uemura in her Bath' (1972), in which the sorrow or suffering experienced by the subjects is transformed into a 'picture' for the admiration of the viewer.^{xix} With a critique of 'liberal' sensitivity worthy of Brecht's distaste for what he considered the bourgeois self-indulgent yearning for catharsis, the radical artist Martha Rosler uncovered, in the early 1980s, the documentary photograph's strategy of 'implor[ing] us to look in the face of deprivation and weep': 'The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position', she maintained.^{xx}

Brecht sought to detach his audience from any identification with the emotional experience of his characters through the use of so-called alienation techniques, which drew attention to the constructed nature of the drama. In a similar manner, to avoid the unreflective identification with the subject matter, postmodern approaches to photography since the 1980s have focused upon the self-conscious questioning of the act of image-making itself as the topic of inquiry.^{xxi} The photographs, for example, of Gilles Peress of the Iranian revolution in 1979 were designed to be hard to read, ambiguous and often confusing.^{xxii} *New York Times* critic Andy Grundberg observed their 'implicit abandonment of any moral position': 'As an outsider [Peress] found the events in Iran incomprehensible, and the pictures he made there [...] are documents of that incomprehension'.^{xxiii}

The self-ironising quality of these photographs corresponds with the self-reflexive gesture, drawing attention to its own medium, delineated by Judith Butler in *Frames of War*. The political attempt to control journalistic reporting of conflict since Vietnam, together with the increased dangers of a more technological form of warfare, has changed the nature of war photography in the last decade. Western journalists are now ‘embedded’ with western troops. For Butler, this is the unseen ‘frame’ of the photograph. Drawing attention to the power dynamics behind the medium is her task. It is interesting, in this context, to note the self-reflexive nature of recognition in literature, and particularly tragic drama, according to Terence Cave. ‘To tell a story’, he observes, ‘which ends in recognition is to perform one of the most quintessential of all acts of fictional narration – the recognition is, as it were, the mark or signature of a fiction’.^{xxiv} Some photography, with its complex manipulation of the gaze, can expose the ‘frame’. In this case, it is a question of looking at the looking or even looking at the not looking. Making the viewer aware of the complicated pitfalls of viewing, and the problematic relationship between ethics and aesthetics, might therefore be considered one of the challenges of tragic representation.

However, my analysis so far of the recent writing on photography and its connections with thinking about tragic drama, is only concerned with the victims. Such writing assumes that the business of tragedy, and that of ethical viewing, is to ‘enlarge’ our capacity to feel pity and to galvanise our capacity to reflect upon – and maybe prevent – the suffering of others.^{xxv} For Emmanuel Levinas, the act of recognition results in respect; the process is all about non-violence and peace, conjuring up responsibility and freedom in through the encounter with others:

The face in which the other – the absolute other – presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it [...] It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial.

This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it.^{xxvi}

Judith Butler also assumes that recognition of our common state of precariousness will result in reciprocal tolerance and interdependency.

But what about the perpetrators of war and suffering? The limits of toleration? And what about the role of fear? Aristotle, after all, wrote that tragedy ‘through the arousal of pity *and fear* effect[s] the katharsis of such emotions’ (Chap. VI.p. 37). He sees the polarisation of tragic response into pity and fear or into friends and enemies as a fundamental consequence of the act of recognition, arguing that ‘recognition [...] is a change from ignorance to knowledge, bringing characters into either a close bond, or enmity, with one another’ (Chap. XI.p.43). On the one hand, the fear is based upon a recognition of common human fallibility, (a man ‘like ourselves’), resulting therefore in a situation rather like Butler’s recognition of our shared precariousness. But on the other hand, Aristotle suggests that fear can produce enmity, since friends or enemies are structurally closer than those who have no connection at all (Chap. IV.p. 46) and the shared recognition can be of enmity and terror. In that case, the act of recognition might be said to make the world ‘intelligible’ by ‘stratifying it’, leading to injustice and patterns of subordination and dominance, as Patchen Markell has argued recently.^{xxvii} Tragic fear, then, both reduces difference and exacerbates it, resulting sometimes in Butler’s shared vulnerability and sometimes in Markell’s ‘semblance of sovereign agency at others’ expense’ (5). At the very least, Greek tragedy considers the norms of amity or enmity that are produced by the act of recognition and brings to our scrutiny the question of whether this polarisation is inevitable. If the images from Afghanistan are considered in the light of Greek tragedy, they can also raise questions about fear and recognition and the complicated function of bearing witness in a conflict zone for the formation of the citizen body.

Looking (or not looking) at Bin Laden

Two of the main concerns in *Antigone* are the questions of how one treats one’s enemies and what is the proper way to dispose of the dead. While Greek tragedy avoided onstage violence, it did place great emphasis upon looking at dead bodies after violence had occurred. The invitation to look was often accompanied with an appeal to the justice or injustice of the death, or the improbable simplification of the relationship with the dead

into friendship or enmity. Thus Clytemnestra shows the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, clarifying that they are ‘enemies who had seemed to be friends’ (*Agamemnon*, 1374-5), and in the next play in the trilogy *Orestes* shows the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, displayed with the same net in which Clytemnestra trapped his father (*Libation Bearers*, 973-89). And similarly, at the end of *Antigone*, Creon brings out the body of Haemon for public mourning, highlighting his close identification with his son: ‘You look at us the killer and the killed / of the one blood’.^{xxviii} By contrast, while Creon attends eventually to the proper burial of Polyneices, he does not bring his body out on stage or offer it that public act of witnessing and mourning. As far as Creon is concerned, there is still a division between friends and enemies, indicated by that onstage or offstage recognition.

However, although Polyneices’ body is never seen, we hear about it throughout the play, lying exposed to the sun, stinking so much that the guards must station themselves upwind of it, eaten by animals and vomited up over the city’s altars by birds. The body polarises opinion, for while Creon desires to make it a ‘an obscenity to behold’ (αἰκισθὲν τ’ ἰδεῖν: 206), Antigone wishes to ‘join in love, not hate’ (οὔτοι συνέχθεῖν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν: 523), and Ismene’s and the guard’s reactions are different again. While Ismene thinks Antigone is out of her mind (ἄνους), to disobey Creon by burying it, she is still ‘rightly (ὀρθῶς: 99) dear to those who love [her]’. Ismene’s ‘ὀρθῶς’ functions here to interrogate the very notion of orthodoxy, and indeed, as Simon Goldhill has pointed out recently, Ismene serves to complicate the notion of what is ‘common’ (κοινὸν: 1) and normal in the play.^{xxix} Despite Creon’s attempted simplifications, therefore, the unseen body of Polyneices radically challenges the easy conventions of loyalty and enmity which war apparently demands.

Contrary to the treatment of Polyneices in *Antigone*, we heard very little about Bin Laden’s body. True, the very recent best-selling account by ‘Mark Owen’, the Navy Seal who was in the team that killed Bin Laden, spends some time describing the body, his uncertainty over whether it was indeed Bin Laden’s corpse, his efforts to verify it and the transportation of it into the helicopter out of the compound. The examination of the

body seemed to involve some rough treatment, described with the violence associated with the age-old, traditional disrespectful treatment of an enemy's body: Owen 'pull[ed] his beard to the right and then the left', 'peeled back the eyelid, exposing his now lifeless brown eye', 'jammed [a cotton swab] in Bin Laden's mouth to get a saliva sample', 'slammed my syringe into the fleshy part of Bin Laden's thigh', and 'pulled [the body bag] off the truck [where] it flopped on the cement floor like a dead fish'.^{xxx} In other respects, 'Mark Owen' engaged in familiar tactics when confronting the body of an enemy, dwelling on his effeminacy as evidenced by Bin Laden's apparent use of hair dye. (248). But the prevailing theme in his account is the discrepancy between the popular image of Bin Laden and the dead body he witnessed. (241). He actually took many photos of Bin Laden as part of his verifying evidence that he had indeed killed 'the most wanted man in the world'. But a decision was taken by the White House not to release the photographs nor to give any details, visual or descriptive, of the disposal of the body at sea. The absence of officially verified images of Bin Laden's dead body ensured that the discrepancy between the image of the 'world's most wanted man' and his physical remains continued in the public imagination.

In contrast with Osama Bin Laden, of course, the fate of Saddam Hussein was widely disseminated. Indeed, many believed it was far too visible. First, footage was released of a disheveled, confused Saddam being subjected to medical examination, his hair checked for fleas and his mouth probed open ostensibly to look for a hidden cyanide capsule but implicitly to humiliate. There was a televised trial, which continued for a little over a year, from October 2005 until November 2006. And then finally the execution by hanging, officially filmed by the Iraqi state television news agency up until the moment of actual execution. An amateur video, shot on a mobile phone by one of the guards, actually showed the entire hanging, complete with the shouted taunts by the other guards. It was allegedly to avoid the complicated fallout of the treatment of Saddam – the accusations of degradation, the adulation of a martyr – that the decision was taken to allow Osama Bin Laden's body to disappear, so that there would be no reprisals on American forces nor the transformation of Bin Laden's grave into a martyr's shrine.

The contrasting approaches to the deaths of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein highlight the dilemma about how to treat the death of one's enemies. In the latter case, the body was displayed for mockery; in the former, the body arguably was not given the respect of a public funeral. These two specific cases bring into focus the problem of the visibility or invisibility of the enemy, and the consequent formation of the viewing citizen body, whether it is bolstered by mockery, scorn or the affect of neglect. The deaths of Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein need to be set in the context of our general image – or lack of images – of the supposed enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before this can be done, however, we need to consider the sources of these images, those who click the camera shutter. Complicating the issue now is the proliferation of images, the emergence of so-called citizen journalists and the distinction between them and professional journalists. How is tragic representation controlled, organised and used to regulate or interrogate fear when images are circulated via so many sources? How does the comparison with tragic drama allow us to re-examine this new phenomenon, multifarious as it is?

With Western journalists now 'embedded' with western troops, there are relatively few pictures of the 'enemy' shot by professional photographers; the images are mostly shot from the perspective of the American or British military. But professional photographers are all too aware of the constraints and often think of ways of indicating, and thereby paradoxically eluding, the 'frame'. In contrast, amateur photographers – citizens, other soldiers – are likely to be immersed in the situation, participants in some way, who consequently get so-called privileged access to the scene and the circulation of whose images is independent of their original context. For Judith Butler to term those who took the photographs in Abu Ghraib 'embedded reporters' is therefore to conflate and confuse two very different situations and to misrepresent the work of serious, professional photographers.^{xxxii}

Tim Hetherington's and Peter van Agtmael's award winning photographs from Afghanistan, for example, were taken when they were embedded with the US military and necessarily show an American perspective on the war. But Hetherington's images,

many of which show literally and punningly the American soldiers *in bed* asleep, combine a surprising intimacy in the war zone with a sense of the vulnerability and questionable purpose behind the western campaign.^{xxxii} This is subtly, as one commentator put it, ‘the other side of Afghanistan.’^{xxxiii} Meanwhile, Magnum photographer Peter Van Agtmael shot soldiers at work in Iraq and Afghanistan, either tenderly caring for their wounded comrades or indifferently standing by as enemy combatants are taken prisoner or their houses are violently searched.^{xxxiv} He has commented: ‘My photographs are primarily about contradictions; the simultaneous and infinite coexistence of beauty mingling with destruction, of love with hatred. The endless capacity for contradiction has defined humanity’s existence, and is forced into stark relief in war.’^{xxxv} The work of these professional photographers, and others like them, seeks to critique the partiality of our viewpoint from within, composing the events for our collective reflection and simultaneously commenting ironically upon them.

But the images that have most attracted the attention and reflection of the public have been taken not by professional photographers but by soldiers, and in ways that make them very hard to read. Much has been written on the set of scandalous images from Iraq: the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison.^{xxxvi} In particular, commentators have focused upon the double invisibility of the photographs, the extent to which the soldiers in the photographs and the ones who took the photographs were inviting each other to share in their ‘fun’, without seeing the humiliation suffered by Iraqi prisoners, and the fact that the behaviour was excused and explained away by a regime who could not see that it was dependent upon the very ideology which could not look properly at the photograph. The soldiers immersed in the situation that they photograph are like Nietzsche’s conceptualisation of the tragic chorus, the chorus which experiences and participates in the tragic business, and even generates it, rather than spectating and analysing from a distance: ‘the sole “reality” is the chorus, which generates the vision from within itself, and speaks of it with all the symbolism of dance, sound and words.’^{xxxvii}

However, the similarly scandalous image of US marines urinating on the bodies of three dead Taliban fighters, which came to public attention in January 2012, has not

received much critical attention. A 39-second video, filmed presumably by another soldier, was posted on YouTube and subsequently still images from the video were published in newspapers around the world. The faces of the dead and the genitals of the Americans were pixilated in the published pictures, in order to preserve some notion of decency, (on which more later), and to prevent the troubling repercussions of the identification of the dead. But the video footage still included the audible taunts of the dead by the Americans. There was an immediate outcry. Killing the Taliban was commendable; pissing on them was not. General Adrian Bradshaw, deputy commander of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) in Afghanistan, was quick and clear-cut in his response: ‘any action which treats the dead with disrespect is deplorable.’ According to the Geneva Convention, once an enemy combatant has died, in effect, he is no longer to be considered hostile but is to be regarded as representing the humanity which we hold in common, to be treated with respect. This is, of course, in contrast to Creon’s formulation in Sophocles’ play, that ‘Never can an enemy become a friend, not even when he dies’ (522). (As an aside, it is interesting to note that war reverses the conventional polarisation between ‘significance’ and ‘physical nature’ demarcated by death, which Walter Benjamin described.^{xxxviii} According to the rules of war, human significance is only accorded an enemy fighter once he has died). The response from the American embassy in Kabul was a little more complex: ‘such actions are reprehensible, dishonour the sacrifices of our military and the American people, and violate the core values of both our societies’, said Gavin Sundwall, the embassy spokesman.^{xxxix} His response was interesting in that it placed the emphasis upon the ‘dishonour’ done to the ‘American people’ by the soldier’s actions, rather than upon the dishonour done to the Taliban/Afghans. In other words, he managed to distance himself from the soldiers until they became the ‘violators’, or the enemy, and yet at the same time he did not name the Afghans as the appropriate recipients of honour, and therefore, by extension, friends. Reading the photograph was complicated – who were the friends? who were the enemies? – and Sundwall’s gloss on the process was masterly in its entangled logic.

The pissing soldiers in Afghanistan were not looking at the camera, yet their taunts, captured on the audio soundtrack, suggest a performance, undertaken

competitively with each other and for the edification of the unseen recorder of the event. Susan Sontag observed that nowadays ‘to live is also to pose’ and that the photo acts as a circulated trophy, disseminated to the social networks.^{xl} The prevailing culture exposed by these images, however, is not so different from Revenge tragedy with its tradition of the triumphant mockery of the dead and its inherently performative quality.^{xli} I am interested, too, in the boundaries of decency assumed by the publication of the photograph. The action of urination is not hidden. The faces of the marines are clear, even if two are semi-covered by helmets and the other two wear dark glasses, but their genitals are pixelated. The message is that the viewer can look at torture and abuse, and at the bodies of dead Taliban, but not at the naked human member. One is reminded of Agave’s question to her father at the end of the *Bacchae*, after she has torn apart the body of her son:

Agave: Where is the dear body of my son, father?

Cadmus: (*pointing to the stretcher*): Here I bring it after
a difficult search.

Agave: Has it been properly (‘καλῶς’) fitted together,
limb with limb?

Cadmus: ----- [text missing]^{xlii}

Cadmus’s answer to Agave is missing, the textual lacuna here registering, perhaps all too conveniently, an ethical aporia. The extent to which anything can be considered ‘καλῶς’, ‘proper’ or decent after the events of the *Bacchae* is hard to imagine. In fact, the critical consensus is now that Agave did somehow fit the body together on stage. If this were the case, one could read it as an empty gesture of aestheticising violence, ironically attempting to make the scattered parts fit into an orderly, attractive, figural pattern. The concern with decency in the photograph of the marines in Afghanistan smacks of a similar redundancy, setting aside the larger issue of violation in the attempt to make the image appropriate for the sensibilities of a Western audience.

What do we see when we look at the bodies of the Taliban in this picture? Unlike in the Abu Ghraib pictures, the bodies are not at the centre of the frame but on the edge, and in some publications, cropped out altogether. The faces are not hooded but blurred;

from what one can detect, they are bloody and mutilated from battle. Indeed, rather than the faces, it is the hands which identify these figures as human, and which reach out in appeal. The hand of one fighter stretches out away from the body; the hand of another is curled over his stomach. Unlike the marines, their bodies are fully covered, ‘decent’ except for a few inches of midriff where one fighter’s shirt has been drawn up in the conflict. They have no weapons, unlike the marines. Instead, bloodstained scarves and unfurled turbans surround them, but – maybe significantly – don’t cover them. The ostensible effect of the photograph is to turn the Taliban into unidentifiable objects, a blur of blood and clothing; the inadvertent force is to allow their humanity to return, uncannily, with the outstretched hand. The hand gesture, then, unremarked by all comments on the image, lingers with me as a quasi-*punctum* in Barthes’ terms, an almost unnameable detail which is a ‘symptom of disturbance’.^{xliii} (As another aside, one wonders at this point why Levinas places such emphasis upon the face as the site of expression and appeal, and does not consider the hand as another traditional instrument of supplication?)

Greek tragedy, and *Antigone* in particular, is very concerned with what can be seen and what cannot. It is concerned with the need to bring things to the light, with the desire to be witnessed and with the significance of withholding that act of witnessing. Antigone wants her act of burying Polyneices to be made public, to be ‘proclaimed’ to all’.^{xliv} Creon is determined that she should be buried alive away from the city, that her death should not be seen:

I will take her down some wild, desolate path
never trod by men, and wall her up alive
in a rocky vault. and set out short rations,
just the measure piety demands
to keep the entire city free (ὕπεκφύγη: 776) of defilement.^{xlv}

Creon’s evasiveness is emphasised by the verb *pheugein* here, a word which is repeated many times in the whole play, indicating the desire to escape recognition and responsibility.^{xlvi} When Antigone comes out to give her final speech as she is being led to her death, she asks the chorus to witness her (ὀρᾶτ’ ἔμ’: 806), but it is possible (as I

saw in a production recently to great effect) for the chorus specifically not to look at Antigone at this point, to avert their gaze, and just occasionally not to be able to prevent their eyes gliding onto her lone figure.^{xlvii}

Looking at the enemy, actually seeing his face, noticing the details of his person – his clothes, his customs, his feelings – can lead to paradoxical, contradictory effects. It can apparently elicit compassion, with the Levinasian force of confronting and respecting the Other. Or it can result in a grotesque objectification, a humiliating transformation of the hostile combatant into a fantastical display of the subject's worst fears. Aeschylus' play *The Persians*, which dramatises the defeat of Xerxes, the king of Persia, and his army at the battle of Salamis, compelled the ancient Athenians to look at their, very recent, enemy. That the effect of such act of looking in the theatre is ambivalent is testified to by the production history of the play. The ancient tragedy has been performed both as a morale boosting way of grotesquely ridiculing the enemy and as a means of looking at the enemy and eliciting compassion. In 1983, for example, in the last years of the Cold War, the Berliner Ensemble in East Germany portrayed the protagonists – the Persian king and queen - as examples of western decadence. This was effectively a transformation of the enemy into satirical spectacle.^{xlviii} But in contrast, the 1993 production by Peter Sellars, which toured the US and Europe not long after the first Gulf War, aimed to compel its audience to think about the humanity of the enemy, by casting the protagonists sympathetically as Iraqis. 'In America', commented Sellars, 'the war in Iraq was shown with no Iraqis at all – dead or alive [...] We're saying come and meet a few'.^{xlix} Seeing the enemy from their point of view, according to Sellars, effectively awakens compassion and 'tests people's tolerance of different opinions and of difference in general'. Thus it is 'crucial to the functioning of democracy'.¹

So looking at the enemy can lead to very different, contradictory effects. But not looking at the enemy is also multivalent. It can be interpreted as a form of neglect, the Other registered as insignificant because it is displaced to the realm of the invisible. There was no body count performed for both the Iraqi and Afghan victims of the two wars of the last decade - a decision announced by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on

CBS news in March 2002 with the words ‘I don’t do body counts’ and echoed by his chief General in Afghanistan, General Tommy Franks, a few days later. The policy, by the US Defence department, of not counting the enemy combatant and civilian casualties has been interpreted by many as indicative of a form of blindness to the human cost of US military intervention, a troubling indifference which has been complicated – and made more troubling – by the revelation from Wikileaks that allegedly the Pentagon did in fact count the enemy dead, but deliberately withheld publication. In this case, the invisibility of the enemy in photographic terms might indicate a similar blindness, indifference or deliberate repression.^{li} But on the other hand, not looking at the enemy evades the possibility of familiarising him, of rendering him understandable through caricature or the projection of exotic spectacle. The photograph after all, according to Barthes, is an ‘institutional activity’ whose ‘function is to integrate man, to reassure him’.^{lii} If one accepts Barthes’ notion of the photograph’s capacity to pacify and sublimate the traumatic, then one must consider the lack of an image of the enemy as a failed attempt at sublimation, as a continuing haunting presence of the traumatic. The impact of a figure remaining invisible, therefore, is ambivalent but should not be underestimated. ‘There is real power in remaining unmarked’, observed Peggy Phelan in her fascinating claim for the value of invisibility in photography and performance, ‘and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal’.^{liii} Remaining unmarked allows the subject to remain un-trapped by surveillance, not co-opted by hegemonic culture, unseen and unknown.

In their concern with the compulsion to see and the power of not seeing, Greek tragedy and some types of photography are illuminating.^{liv} On the one hand, both forms of representation confront suffering head-on, metaphorically with their eyes open. ‘[Don] McCullin serves as an eye we cannot shut’, wrote John Berger, in the context of a discussion of how we confront shocking images. ‘Such photographs [...] are printed on the black curtain which is drawn across what we choose to forget or refuse to know’.^{lv} The camera, like the eyes of the mask of Greek tragedy, witnesses events ‘because it is created with open eyes’ and ‘faces up to the muses’, according to Tony Harrison^{lvi}. But on the other hand, both Greek tragedy and photography can also register its lack of

response, its moment of turning away, its drawing of the ‘black curtain’.^{lvii} Thus the chorus at the end of Oedipus, twist and turn towards and away from the sight of the blinded and cursed Oedipus, a polluting and taboo figure: ‘Ah, ah, unhappy one, I cannot even bear to look on you, though I wish to ask you many questions and to learn many answers and perceive many things; such is the horror you inspire in me!’^{lviii} And thus the Pete Souza photograph of the Situation Room catches the moment when Clinton puts her hand over her mouth, a hand which could have easily also been placed over her eyes.

The Pete Souza photograph did, of course, have its uncanny double. I want to conclude with the other image of viewing and not viewing the enemy which has emerged recently, to think about the role of revelation, (non)recognition and fear shaping our visual grasp of the decade-long ‘war on terror’. When the Navy Seals stormed the Bin Laden compound in Pakistan, they found a stash of home videos. Amongst these was film footage of Osama Bin Laden, sitting on an old carpet in a dingy room, wrapped in a blanket and watching a television. In lieu of the photograph of the dead Osama, the Pentagon decided to release this video in May 2011, with the soundtrack censored so that we *see* but do not hear the scene. The inverted echo of the Pete Souza image is striking. Unlike the full view of Obama in the Situation Room, we see Osama from behind, and therefore only his back and side profile, not his face. But we see very clearly the television screen that he is watching; it is projecting images of both Osama and President Obama, against a backdrop of the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These two images, the situation room photo and the compound home movie, testify to a double failure or refusal to see, covered by an obsession with viewing. In the first, the ambivalent possibilities of depicting the spectators of a hidden picture aim to cultivate the notion of the enemy as opaque, mysterious, fearful but also insignificant. The spectating group are formed, and conformed, by what they see and recognise and fear or hate; our attention is carefully composed to be about them, not about what they are watching, although as I have argued, the occluded television leaves open the space for speculation, for pity and fear and uncertainty. In the second, haphazardly-shot image, the

spectator, Bin Laden, is also formed by what he sees, the narcissism of watching oneself on television not lost on the video's many commentators. The film was released, presumably, to make him an object of ridicule; to what depths has our fearful enemy been reduced! But the gap between the visible television image and the shadowy, unseen viewer actually demands what the Pentagon never envisaged, a sense of the pathetic, of pathos, or, dare we say, of pity? All we see is Bin Laden's hand clutching the television remote control, flicking from one channel to the next, although all seem to offer the same visual library. Choice but no choice, a decision over a stock of images already archived, a hand which seeks, through the touch of a button, a visual recognition of polarised enmity: such is the tragic spectral image which haunts the Pete Souza iconic representation of the war. One image, it seems to me, calls up the other, invoking the hidden blind spots that are paradoxically foundational for the politically useful forces of fear and Cavellian doubt and certainty. In viewing these two images we are forced to face questions that are central to tragedy, about our sense of ourselves as a society, what we choose to recognise and what we do not, and, in an era of mass media and multiple images, the self-conscious and ambiguous function of bearing witness today.

NOTES

ⁱ Lucy Madison, 'Clinton on Situation Room Photo', *cbsnews.com*, May 5 2011.

ⁱⁱ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is striking that the current interest in the ethics of aesthetics evidenced in photographic theory coincides with the apparent global resurgence of tragic performance in the theatre, particularly of ancient Greek tragedy. For the resurgence of Greek tragedy, see, for example, Helene Foley and Erin Mee (eds), *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1-2.

^{iv} Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (London: Duckworth, 1987), chapter XIV. p. 45. [hereafter references to chapter and page numbers in the text].

^v Two notable exceptions to this convention are *Eumenides*, line 235, when the stage business moves from Delphi to Athens, and *Ajax*, lines 815-865, when Ajax commits suicide without any witnesses besides the audience.

^{vi} Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 213.

^{vii} Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 48.

^{viii} Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1981), 165, cited in Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 235.

^{ix} Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 77.

^x Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 3.

^{xi} Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 115.

^{xii} Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xv. Linfield positions her argument in opposition to Sontag, but in fact her opinions on empathy and moral activism echo Sontag's own, as expressed in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: see Frances Richard, 'The Thin Artifact: On Photography and Suffering', *The Nation*, December 13 2010. The very recent ethical turn in photographic criticism is also evident in Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London and New York: Verso, 2012) and in Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012)

^{xiii} Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, xv-xvi

^{xiv} Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 493.

^{xv} Cora Diamond, 'The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History Of Ideas*, 1.2 (2003), 20.

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- ^{xvi} *Agamemnon*, lines 239-43: Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Christopher Collard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.
- ^{xvii} *Hecuba*, lines 557- 564: Euripides, *Hecuba, The Trojan Woman, Andromache*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 16.
- ^{xviii} Sontag, *On Photography*, 109-110. For a more specifically political critique of the photograph's capacity to 'violently' remove the underlying context behind a photographed 'moment', see John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 40.
- ^{xix} W. Eugene Smith, *Photographs 1934-1975*, ed. Gilles Mora and John T. Hill (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 127, 312.
- ^{xx} Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)' (1981), in Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 178.
- ^{xxi} Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 25. On postmodern photography, see Alan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', *Artforum*, 13.5 (January 1975), 36-45.
- ^{xxii} See Gilles Peress, *Telex Iran: In the Name of Revolution* (New York: Aperture, 1984).
- ^{xxiii} Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography since 1974*, 2nd ed. (New York: Aperture, 1999), 194.
- ^{xxiv} Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 4.
- ^{xxv} For the 'enlarge[ment]' of our capacities for compassion as a 'good in itself', see Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 114.
- ^{xxvi} Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.
- ^{xxvii} Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1-2.
- ^{xxviii} Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. David Grene (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1942; 2nd edn., 1991), 209.
- ^{xxix} Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 235. Goldhill points out Judith Butler's blindness to the significance of

Ismene's questioning of the normative in Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

^{xxx} 'Mark Owen' with Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal. The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 241-2; 242; 244; 265. The Navy Seal's name was changed to Mark Owen for his security.

^{xxxi} Butler, *Frames of War*, 83.

^{xxxii} Tim Hetherington, *Infidel* (London: Chris Boot, 2010). Hetherington's book accompanied his Academy award nominated documentary film, *Restrepo*, dir. Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger (National Geographic Entertainment, 2010). Panos Pictures photographer Tim Hetherington was killed in Misrata, Libya, while shooting the conflict in April 2011.

^{xxxiii} See Rob Sharp, 'Combat Fatigue', *The Independent*, 11 September 2010.

^{xxxiv} Peter Van Agtmael, *2nd Tour Hope I Don't Die* (Portland: Photolucida, 2009).

^{xxxv} See Van Agtmael's quotation on his Magnum Photos profile: 'Peter Van Agtmael', *Magnumphotos.com*.

^{xxxvi} See esp. Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times*, 23 May 2004; Slavoj Žižek, 'Between Two Deaths', *London Review of Books*, 3 June 2004: 19; Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Invisible Empire: Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib', *Radical History Review*, 95 (Spring 2006), 21-44; W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-4', in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, eds. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 179-207; Butler, *Frames of War*, 63-100; and Katarzyna Beilin, 'The Split-Screen Syndrome': Structuring (Non)Seeing in Two Plays on Abu Ghraib', *Comparative Drama*, 46.4 (2012), 427-450.

^{xxxvii} Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 44.

^{xxxviii} Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 166.

^{xxxix} Gavin Sundwall quoted in ‘Afghan Soldier ‘Killed French Troops Over US Abuse Video’’, *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2012.

^{xl} Sontag, ‘Regarding the Torture of Others’.

^{xli} John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4-5.

^{xlii} Euripides, *The Bacchae*, lines 1298-1300.

^{xliii} Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (1981; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 51.

^{xliv} Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 37-8. (Line numbers of Greek text hereafter in my text).

^{xlv} Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Robert Fagles (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 100.

^{xlvi} Creon’s wish to avoid ‘defilement’ is, of course, ironic, given the fact that Polyneices’ body is about to be revealed as polluting the whole city.

^{xlvii} *Antigone*, directed by Greg Taubman and performed by Extant Arts Company, Columbia Stages, Riverside Theatre, New York, 17th-20th October 2012.

^{xlviii} *The Persians*, performed by the Berliner Ensemble, with translation by Andreas Spätauf, in 1983. For details, see Aeschylus, *The Persians*, ed. and trans. Edith Hall (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips, 1996), introduction, 3.

^{xlix} Sellars quoted in Mark Pappenheim, ‘The Greeks have a word for it: Read the signs in the work of Peter Sellars and you’ll see actions speak louder than words’, *The Independent*, August 16 1993. Again I am indebted to Edith Hall’s introduction to *The Persians* for this reference.

^l Sellars quoted in John Lahr, ‘Inventing the Enemy’ [review of *Persians*, dir. Peter Sellars], *The New Yorker* (October 18 1993), 103. Xerxes, however, was depicted less sympathetically as a megalomaniacal Saddam Hussein figure: see Helene Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 140-41.

^{li} It is possible to compare the controversy surrounding Stephen Dupont’s notorious photograph of the burning of Taliban bodies, which earned him nominations for the Robert Capa Gold Medal Award and for the Rory Peck Award in 2005. The allegation

was that the US marines had deliberately arranged the bodies to face Mecca and thus, together with the act of cremation rather than burial, the action, captured on film, was considered a desecration by Muslims. This was widely interpreted to be either negligence on the part of the Americans or a deliberate psychological operation, designed to provoke and thus smoke out the enemy. However the apparent failure to see and respect the enemy's cultural traditions was further occluded by censorship, when, according to Dupont, 'the most powerful footage was not shown to the audience': see 'Q&A: Censorship Round Two', *culturaldevelopmentconsulting.com*, 9 May 2012.

^{lii} Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 31.

^{liii} Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 6.

^{liv} For the connection between photography and theatre, see, for example, Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 31-2.

^{lv} Berger, *About Looking*, 38. Berger was referring to the war photographer, Don McCullin, here.

^{lvi} Tony Harrison, 'Facing Up to the Muses', in *Tony Harrison*, ed. N. Astley (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), 440.

^{lvii} See Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 11: 'tragedy represents the critical moments at which words fail'; and Tony Harrison's response: Harrison, 'Facing Up to the Muses', 441.

^{lviii} Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1303-6.