

## Iraq War Body Counts: Reportage, Photography, and Fiction

### Roger Luckhurst

In one of his last works before his death in 2001, W. G. Sebald delivered his “Air War and Literature” lectures in Zürich. They followed Sebald’s enduring theme of the active suppression of the atrocities that underpin cultural memory, particularly in post-war Germany. Sebald addresses in the lectures the structural inability of the immediate post-war generation of writers to confront the appalling facts of the punitive air war launched on the German civilian population.

Sebald writes with what I have elsewhere termed a kind of compulsive *traumatophilia* (see Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*). He accumulates numbers and details (one million tons of ordnance, one hundred and thirty-one cities, six hundred thousand civilians killed, over seven million rendered homeless), only to insist, using a language of suppression or dissociation familiar from trauma theory, that all this “seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness” (4). As the lectures proceed, the rhetoric escalates, Sebald excoriates the handful of reports, diaries or fictional texts that make up Germany’s post-war “ruin literature.” In aesthetic terms, neither morally offensive melodrama nor avant-garde experiment will do. He sniffs out and denounces all “abstraction and metaphysical fraudulence” (50). Sebald looks for, and condemns for failing to find, any objective confrontation with precisely what

the Allied bombs did to German bodies. And so it is that Sebald provides the gruesome details, in hallucinatory prose:

Horribly disfigured corpses lay everywhere. Bluish little phosphorous flames still flickered around many of them; others had been roasted brown or purple and reduced to a third of their normal size. They lay doubled up in pools of their own melted fat ... Elsewhere, clumps of flesh and bone or whole heaps of bodies had cooked in the water gushing from bursting boilers. (28)

In what feels like a culminating horrible detail, Sebald quotes from a diary entry of Friedrich Beck in 1943, when the writer is in a train packed with refugees from the firebombed cities. In the crush, a cardboard suitcase falls from a rack and bursts open. Inside was “the roasted corpse of a child, shrunk like a mummy, which its half-deranged mother had been carrying about with her” (29). Later, he will return again to the recalcitrance of shrunken, charred bodies, that have to be hacked open and broken apart for autopsy (59-60). Here is something at last of the “concrete and documentary” (59) that Sebald demands. His “ideal of truth”, borrowed from Elias Canetti’s comments on Hiroshima testimony, is for “entirely unpretentious objectivity”, the “only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction” (53). Sebald seems to long for a writing degree zero of atrocity for Germany’s Year Zero, but finds only constant evasion. This sense of never breaking through the erasures and losses of cultural memory to the body of truth drove many of Sebald’s texts, most painfully and schematically his last novel, *Austerlitz*.

Examining the cultural representations of the Iraq War in reportage, photography and fiction, raises similar questions, as I intend to do in this essay. It has long been asked: where are the bodies? Where is the confrontation with the graphic and ruinous consequences of this long and labyrinthine war? The American military and government steadfastly refused to issue even basic figures on the number of Iraqi civilians killed, perhaps learning from the disastrous effects of the “kill lists” issued during the Vietnam War. This has prompted a number of campaigns, such as the Iraq Body Count website, to offer attempted objective estimates based on news and NGO reports, hospital, morgue and government records where possible.

In what follows, I want to investigate the photojournalism from Iraq that was intrinsically shaped by the severe restrictions around the representations of bodies during the American occupation, differentiated according to their nationality and policed so starkly that it prompted the emergence of alternative representational practices and networks of circulation of images in galleries, artists’ books, and other formats. In the second half, I also want to examine a similar split in recent Iraq War fiction, ending with an examination of work by Iraqi writers that seem expressly designed to bring the absent bodies back into focus.

### **I Photo-Reportage and its Others**

Any photographer working officially in Iraq alongside the military had to sign an “embed agreement” that put controls on the kinds of images taken and

circulated. These agreements were tightened as “mission accomplished” turned into guerrilla and civil war in 2005 and especially during the 2007 surge, when American casualties were high. Particularly taboo were images of wounded or killed American soldiers: photographers reported they were often most threatened with violence when they lifted their cameras to such scenes (see Kamber, *Photojournalists on War*).

The Iraqi dead could be represented in American media outlets, provided the details were not too graphic. Photographic conventions have emerged that depict aftermaths of bombs targeting civilian populations: lone blasted shoes in the gutter, burnt clothes, the streaks of blood on the tarmac after Improvised Explosive Devices erupt, blurry chaos in hospital corridors, corpses hastily draped in shrouds, bodies depicted from angles that retain their anonymity. There have been strong accusations, as in David Shields’ aggressive polemic about images of photo-reportage the war from the *New York Times*, that they serve only to glorify war “through an unrelenting parade of beautiful images whose function is to sanctify the accompanying descriptions of battle, death, destruction and displacement” (7). Shields’ collection of lavish photographs that reframe images from newspaper illustration to fine art photograph ends with two “beautiful” pictures of dead Iraqi soldiers that had been carried on the front page.

As with Sebald, there are counter-representational strategies that have sought to depict a “truer” truth than this, circulating images deemed too graphic for mainstream media outlets. Noted examples include Luc Delahaye’s “Taliban”, an

uncompromising image of a dead soldier lying shoeless in a ditch. Delahaye was an embedded photojournalist in Afghanistan in 2002, working to provide images for *Newsweek*, but was in the process of moving his visual practice into the arena of fine art (and he won the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for this series in 2005). His photojournalism was on a standard 35mm camera, but “Taliban” was taken with a tripod-mounted, large format Linhof panoramic camera, which allowed him to present the image in an overwhelming eight by four metre format on gallery walls as part of his “History” series. Delahaye considers that slowness, precision and monumentality of this work attains an aesthetic detachment he elides with a greater objective truth than the selected, captioned and often repurposed newspaper image. He wanted to achieve a certain “measuring of the distance that separates me from what I see”, he stated (Durdin, 13). Delahaye’s claim of his photographs is embraced by some critics but fiercely challenged by others (see Duganne, 59-63).

Refusing any truck with the mode of detachment, another example of the explicit counter-image was the artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s polemical project, “The Incommensurable Banner.” This premiered in 2008 at the Brighton Photo Biennial called “Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War.” In a protected gallery space, prefaced by warning signs, this controversial installation presented an overwhelming array of photographs of ruined and devastated bodies from the Iraq War across a continuous eighteen-meter long banner. The photographs had all been deemed too graphic to appear in the media and Hirschhorn wanted to confront the politics of that exclusion, picking up on prior digital archive projects like MemoryHole.org, a website designed as a repository

of “unacceptable” war images, preserved against the erasures of the mainstream media.

The photographer Nina Berman took portraits of severely injured American veterans back home, focusing unblinkingly on wounds and lost limbs to address the irresolvable violence of the war. These inevitably proved difficult to place in newspapers and magazines, and instead she began to present them in exhibition spaces, and eventually as an artist’s book, the portraits published as *Purple Hearts: Back from Iraq* by the activist Trolley Press in London. This is just one example of the book route used as mainstream press channels were narrowed or choked off.

The photojournalist Michael Kamber has since produced the major anthology of interviews and images, *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*, a book intended to address “combat, the toil of war, censorship” with “the goal ... to publish photos that had not been seen in the United States” (267). The interviews with photojournalists circle continually around the question of censorship and try to situate some of the more graphic images. This was perhaps understandably released by a university press rather than any mainstream outlet.

At the same time as these disputes over images circulating in the media, the Iraq War was also the first extensively “blogged” war, with vast numbers of unofficial digital images pouring onto the internet from amateur or unofficial photographers inside American forces. This was part of the multiplication of

forms that distinguishes representations of the Iraq War, as Stacey Peebles has observed. Some, like the photoblogging site “Doc in the Box” by Sean Dustman or Jay Romano’s Flickr account were significant documentary records (Romano had experience as a professional photojournalist). But these unofficial channels also allowed the circulation of transgressive or taboo “trophy” images of the enemy dead. The unhappy case of NowThatsFuckedUp.com was exposed in 2005, when soldiers were given access to pornography online in exchange for proof of being in the field – the mark of authenticity rapidly becoming traded snaps of corpses, body parts and ruined bodies of Iraqis. These, too, were circulated and displayed on the site. This logic of obscene equivalence of violent power intensified “the Abu Ghraib effect” (Eisenman), an articulation of the seeming state of exception Iraq had become. The NTFU web-site revealed that the image of violence could often be a *constitutive* element in the scopic regime of imperial domination pursued in the initial year or so of the American Occupation (see Malik).

In spite of the highly circumscribed and conventional depictions of Iraqi bodies in the mainstream press, perhaps one might ruefully admit that at least (at least!) they did sometimes receive acknowledgement. This was much more difficult when it came to the question of the representation of American soldiers. “They’ve always been freaky about bodies”, the Baghdad bureau chief for the Associated Press said about the high command (quoted in Kamber and Arango). In 2005, James Rainey surveyed the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and found not a single image of a dead American soldier had appeared in their pages in the past year. At the time, even the release of images of soldiers being repatriated in coffins draped with the American flag had been

banned (a restriction first introduced in the first Gulf War in 1991). A year into the Iraq War, this had been flouted by a photograph of coffins being flown home published in April 2004. When an employee of Maytag Aircraft was fired for taking the picture, pressure through Freedom of Information requests built and more images began to circulate. This ban was rescinded in 2009 by the new administration, although the Pentagon continues into 2016 to fight the release of prisoner abuse photographs into the public sphere (see Pandey).

This very restricted economy of images made Khalid Mohammed's images of the cruel display of the charred bodies of American contractors in Fallujah shocking and notorious, although many in the sequence were never shown. Stefan Zaklin of the European Press Photo Agency was placed under pressure after the *Village Voice* printed his image of a U.S. army captain killed in a Fallujah firefight because it was potentially possible to identify the soldier from the image. Photographer Zorah Miller was threatened with a ban from working in any Marine sites "anywhere in the world" after he took images of dead and wounded American personnel after a suicide bomb attack in Garma in Iraq (Kamber, *Photojournalists*, 174). There were immediate demands to delete his memory cards, and then threats of violence after he posted some images on his personal website, although they kept careful adherence to rules about anonymity. The photographer Chris Hondros (who was killed covering Libya in 2011) snapped a shot of the five year-old Iraqi child Samar Hassan, covered in the blood of the parents who had just been shot in error by American soldiers whose boots frame the child's terrified face. He sent the sequence of images back to his agency in New York as soon as he could, to outflank a military command that feared that



“some kind of seminal, career-ending photo might have been taken, so they had wanted to delay our distributing the photos” (Kamber, *Photojournalists*, 119). When it was published in *Newsweek* and syndicated around the world, he was promptly thrown out of embed contract (see Rainey).

By 2008, the *New York Times* headlined a story “4 000 U. S. Deaths, and a Handful of Images” (written by Kamber and Arango), which suggested that the danger, expense and military restrictions on photojournalists in Iraq meant that five years after the invasion there were only ten photographers left in the theatre of war to cover a territory being fought over by 150 000 U. S. troops and several factional armies. One might well concur with Sebald that this was coincident with a deliberate tactic for the suppression of the violent logic of war in the cultural memory.

The asymmetry of the Iraq War plainly extended to images too. What makes a *grievable life*? Judith Butler asked near the beginning of the war. “Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies”: feelings of precariousness, loss and mourning constitute foundational kinds of social attachment (*Prekarious Life*, 20). To manage the circulation of images of the wounded or dead is evidently an attempt to manage sympathy. The military initially wants to project the fantasy of the invulnerable, metallized body, immune to the openness and breached liminality of the wound (to use the language of Klaus Theweleit’s classic study of the soldier’s body). But the state is always willing to constitute its “imagined community”, its national sense of collective identity, around violence and sacrifice, relentlessly channelling its

bonds of sympathy towards its own dead and always at the expense of the enemy (see Anderson). In the West, at that asymmetric end of the war, the allied soldier is individualized and hence always grievable, while it is left to an unofficial website to calculate the anonymous number of the Iraqi war dead. “War is framed in certain ways to control and heighten affect in relation to the differential grievability of lives” (Butler, *Frames of War*, 26). The asymmetry of images reinforces this: proscription or careful curation of American bodies *versus* the general circulation of images of Iraqi bodies designed to communicate abstract number. Number, the scale of the war dead, Mary Favret argues, sends not just representation but the whole apparatus of the moral sentiments into crisis, because abstraction short-circuits sympathy.

This asymmetry is not a simple or stable binary, however. The complexity of the Iraq War is that it is not a discrete engagement, but sits in an ongoing, labyrinthine and indeterminable “War on Terror”. Triumphant images of “mission accomplished” by an efficient military-industrial complex in 2003 have been replaced by uneasy occupation, insurrection, civil war, factional violence, and the very different asymmetry of guerrilla warfare, where the lumbering presence of an institutional occupying force becomes subject to a mobile and unpredictable violence that chips away at overstretched forces in beleaguered Forward Operating Bases and accumulates steady losses. The abiding scenario of this phase of the war has been vulnerable American bodies targeted by Improvised Explosive Devices. At the height of the insurrections across Iraq, the withholding of images might have had more to do with the *culture of defeat* than the management of a triumphant imperial “imagined community” (see

Schivelbusch). The images that emerged from the Abu Ghraib prison, despite fierce attempts to suppress them, became the emblem of this culture of moral defeat. "The photographs are us", Susan Sontag declared very early on in their circulation. "That is, they are representative of distinctive policies and of the fundamental corruptions of colonial rule" (Sontag, "What Have We Done?" 3). These images exercised the same sort of power as Ron Haeberle's unofficial photographs of the massacre at My Lai in March 1968 when they were finally released a year after they were taken: images around which opposition to the war could coalesce (see Schlegel).

Both escalating losses and the fear of the devastating image of the wounded, humiliated, or dead soldier have contributed to the very transformation of the conduct of war itself. The First Gulf War, where reporters were kept entirely outside the field of engagement, was already called a "derealized" war, "a war without bodies" (Taylor, 157-8). The war was virtualized through nose-cone cameras, which abstracted the consequences of bombardment. Again, this was why Kenneth Jerecke's unofficial photograph of a charred corpse in a burnt-out wreck on the Basra Road, "Incinerated Iraqi", was such a visceral shock at the end of the war (an image initially not published or circulated in the American press as it was considered too graphic). Under Bush Jr. and Obama, tactics of derealisation have accelerated. Obama's promised withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan was (messily) effected, although with manifold unseen consequences and the steadily growing return of military trainers, advisors, and secretive special operation forces. Visible and territorially deployed armies have been replaced by invisible infiltrations in "the age of the commando" (see

Gallagher). Otherwise, though, this diffuse war is principally conducted by American forces in *bodiless* ways, either through proxy forces on the ground (whose bodies American statisticians do not count) or through drones.

UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) are the epitome of asymmetric warfare, since they eliminate reciprocity and work by “putting vulnerable bodies out of reach” (Chamayou, 12). A hybrid prosthetic technology (as Rothstein details), drones absent the American body entirely from the theatre of war, whilst reducing the war zone to a highly specific “kill box” that claims to narrow down the field of engagement solely to the body of the target, although the whole euphemistic language of “collateral” damage undercuts the promise of the “just” or “surgical” strike. Initially used as surveillance devices, drones have been steadily weaponized since the introduction of the Predator in 1995. The technology was considerably advanced by the Israeli Defence Force in their transformation of Palestine into a drone-policed territory (see Saif). The intervention in Kosovo in 1999, where Serbian forces were defeated by bombs delivered from above 15 000 feet without the loss of a single pilot, offered the dream of a “humanitarian” intervention of pure asymmetry. Drones have extended this apparently “risk free” option. The first lethal unmanned drone strikes took place in 2002, in Pakistan and Yemen, which were extra-judicial and extra-territorial targeted assassinations. They were used in Afghanistan from 2004, and are now deployed across the region (and further into Libya and the Sudan) almost daily by both the military and CIA from a diffuse and borderless airspace that questionably overrides legal and geographical sovereignties (see Sifton). Extraterritoriality has become the crucial legal concept of the contemporary era (see Amir and

Sela). It is estimated that up to 3 474 deaths were attributable to drone strikes in the northern tribal areas of Pakistan between 2004 and 2012, for instance.

Grégoire Chamayou's elegant and forensic philosophical investigation, *Drone Theory*, points to the strange phenomenological split between the drone operator in the Nevada desert and the device hovering above the target thousands of miles away, a spooky absent-tele-presence that dislocates psychological and moral coherence, a produces a necro-ethics that divorces action from consequence. There are specific traumatic disorders that emerge directly from this dissociation. Drone operators were initially mocked for claiming to suffer from PTSD – particularly by veterans who had been at bodily risk in the theatre of war. It is now a sufficiently recognized disturbing dissociation to have been the subject of several investigations (see Dao), the low-budget American film, *Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, 2014) and the bigger budget *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2016). "What if drone psychopathology lay ... in the industrial production of compartmentalized psyches, immunized against any possibility of reflecting upon their own violence?" Chamayou asks (123).

The drone therefore further *disembodies* the experience of the unfolding war, creating what Allen Feldman calls very deliberately a "political intangibility" (a lack of meaningful *touch*, a management of any haptic sense of connection), or else, more explicitly, a "politics of disincarnation" (9). One strategic response to this asymmetry, where American bodies disappear but Middle Eastern are increasingly realized only as targets, is to intensify the Sebaldian demand for more direct returns to the body in war in cultural representation.

Except, of course, we know that this is rarely the demand of those who think and write about the photography of war. The complaint that the photographic image either aestheticizes war or seductively imprints itself *as* the real, has shadowed the emergence of combat photography from the 1850s, from the moment Roger Fenton first moved the cannon balls around in the Crimean War (which some ascribe to purely aesthetic reasons) or when Felice Beato took the first known photographs of the dead on the battlefield in China in 1860, anticipating the way a trade in photographs of fallen soldiers took off in the American Civil War. In the Vietnam era, John Berger's famous essay "Photographs of Agony" proposed that the atrocity photograph induced passivity and diffused activism into useless aesthetic sentiment. This is a position Susan Sontag circled around in her influential yet always symptomatically ambiguous and murky arguments on the issue. Sontag powerfully recorded the searing bodily effect of her very first encounter with images of the dead of Bergen-Belsen in 1945 in *On Photography*, images that "cut me" (20). But she seemed then to regard shock as a steadily lessening affect that ended in indifference or ennui, unless the image was forcefully framed and reanimated by text. Photographs are "analgesic morally", she concluded (110). *Regarding the Pain of Others* is less sure ("Let the atrocious image haunt us" she adjures at one point (102)), yet can't quite abandon a Modernist suspicion of the photograph's reality-effect and its dangerous illusion of instant readability.

This is so much the default standard critical position that it barely needs rehearsal. Tactics of foregrounding the constructedness of the image, or the

outright refusal of representation of the atrocious image, are supported from Ulrich Baer on holocaust images to most of the contributors to the *Beautiful Suffering* exhibition catalogue in 2006 (Rheinart et al). These essayists tend to favour Alfredo Jaar's "black box" installations that at once document but also effectively erase his images taken of the Rwanda genocide. Jaar offers a text- and context-heavy self-cancelling gesture that speaks fully to Sontagian Modernist anxiety. Allen Feldman restates this resistance in relation to contemporary wars, boldly declaring that "the aesthetic regimes of typification or matter-of-factness known as synoptic or visual realism underwrite the expansionism of culturally isomorphic war" (6). Realism, he says, is "the mandated aesthetic for the portrayal of violence" (6). Is it? The mandated *critical* position is precisely and routinely his own.

These debates always circle back to a few defining "shock" photographs that have fixed the terms of reference: Nick Ut's napalmed girl in Vietnam, Jerecke's "Incinerated Iraqi", Delahaye's "Taliban". If they still provoke discussion, they are hardly inducing passivity, but instead prompt active interventions into the public sphere. Just as Jacques Derrida once proposed that there was a strategic "time of a thesis" in philosophy (and thus also times when it was possible, desirable or necessary to suspend it), so there is a time for "realism" or direct representation in war photography and a time to problematize, deflect or refuse it. The frame of the image is never static, and in the context of a virtualized, indefinite and geographically indeterminate war that works to abstract, and where even a basic body count is obscured and denied, there can be a political necessity to use apparently "naïve" representational strategies at some times. This can provide

more nuance to Sebald's demand: it is the *early* ruin literature he berates for failing to take the chance to provide documentary witness, to seize the time of the catastrophe. His own belated testament foregrounds erasure, the slippages between text and image, ruin and record, body and memory.

"Words do speak louder than pictures", Sontag declared in *On Photography* (108) – a position she sometimes reversed, particularly when contemplating the shock of the Abu Ghraib images at the end of her career. By and large, critics prefer to hem in what they regard as the indexical image with the supposedly richer polyvalences of text. But in turning to recent Iraq War fiction there is still, I think, a marked reluctance to address the wounded or ruined body, as if narrative fiction too inadvertently participates in this economy of deflection.

## **II Bodies of Fiction**

American Iraq War fiction is the literature of what Ross Chambers calls "aftermath society" (xxi). Actually writing about AIDS memoirs, Chambers' delineation is nevertheless very useful in this context. He marks aftermath cultures as "defined by a strange nexus of denial and acknowledgement of the traumatic such that innocence can be lost and regained over and over" (xxi-ii), producing repetitive loops in the structure of experience and narrative discovery. The model of the belatedness or "afterwardsness" of traumatic registration remains the dominant influence on contemporary war fiction, nestled as it is inside a wider cultural embedding of the trauma narrative (see Luckhurst, *Trauma Question*). It is of course not the only way of representing contemporary war, which is often temporally displaced to other and prior wars,



as I've argued elsewhere (Luckhurst, "Not Now, Not Yet"). But what the literature deploying the trauma narrative often focuses on is the maladjustments of the veteran returning to the American domestic sphere after deployment. As in Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life* (2015) or Michael Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives* (2014), the temporal disadjustment of narrative is meant to mimic the disruptions and occlusions typically associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Afterwardsness is more literal in Ben Fountain's *Billy Flynn's Long Half-Time Walk* (2012), set entirely during the spectacular display of veterans at a homecoming ceremony, with elaborate flashbacks. Obscure legacies or remains, the erasures of bodies and bodies of evidence, is the more expansive subject of Richard House's labyrinthine, overlapping quartet of novels, *The Kills* (2014). The plot of House's books explores the Pynchonian Zone of suspended logic and law that opens up in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, and focuses in part on the post-war consequences on a dubiously legal clear-up team who are tasked with incinerating the traces of the war's corruptions and atrocities at a burn depot in the desert. The disastrous consequences unfold in a narrative that is entirely about aftermath. The more classical PTSD-informed narrative tends to foreground a continuum of American post-conflict domesticity into which an unprocessed Iraq obtrudes only as a profoundly intrusive traumatic disturbance, an uncanny return, driven by the compulsions of the death drive. This is familiar from cinema of the war too, which as Martin Barker and others have suggested establishes the conventions of traumatic narration about returning veterans very early on.

I've offered a wider survey of fictional responses to the Iraq War elsewhere. Here I want only to take up a couple of examples to demonstrate the place of the body, the body count, and the bodies that count in this corpus. I admire Pitre's *Fives and Twenty-Fives* very much, not least for its ambition to weave a strand of actual Iraqi experience into the narrative structure of its multiple perspectives. It is also a good example of how stories of the war come to conform to a conventionalized structure of trauma narration. The delayed, analeptic revelations of the plot nearly always centre around the last "secret", a traumatic kernel that hides the wounded American body. The events of the narrative present in 2011 are determined by flashbacks to deployment at the height of the Civil War in Iraq in 2006. Hence the descent into chaotic addiction and disordered post-traumatic behaviour of the corpsman "Doc" Pleasant is eventually traced back to the punctual trauma of the explosion in 2006 that leads to the death of the team's bomb-tech. Right at the end of the book, "Doc" is pulled back again to this insistent and unprocessable memory: "He rolled over. Every one says I imagined it. He was probably conscious. Knowing it was bad, but thinking I was on my way, even. Thinking he might pass out for a minute, but that I'd get there. Put tourniquets on his arms and legs. He died thinking he'd wake up in Germany. But he didn't. Just bled to death, right there on that fucking hot asphalt, too. Not even in the dirt. Just a stain" (372). Similarly, the middle-class officer, Lieutenant Donovan, circles with more psychological resources yet equal fragility around the firefight that is only belatedly staged, in which his highly competent sergeant, Gomez, receives a head wound, loses forty per cent of her brain, and is left permanently disabled. The fate of "Dodge", the Iraqi translator working for the American army, is less individualized and must bear a more overtly allegorical

fate (hiding in Tunisia in 2011 he improbably becomes a spokesman for the Arab Spring that began there). The uneven distribution of these aftermaths in Pitrie's novel is palpable.

The horrific detail, the delayed traumatic kernel, is operative again in Lish's impressively opaque, disordered and rebarbative *Preparation for the Next Life*. The fatal doom that hangs over the returning veteran is withheld by a narrative voice that mimics a fenced-off, post-traumatic psyche, never at one with itself, but fractured and fugued. The rubble of desperate poverty amongst New York's immigrant communities fills in the narrative present, actively suppressing war memories that rarely force their way up. The analeptic kernel of this again centres on the body and the atrocities his team commits in the field.

We picked up a head on the battlefield and made somebody carry it. My sergeant put it between a body's legs. He made it wink. We took corpses and made them do nasty shit. Like sit them up, like Weekend at Bernie's, wearing shades. Or have them fuck and make a movie. Whatever you can think of. Dress them up. Play WWF. Body-slamming body bags... I probably laughed at shit no one would believe (Lish, Ch. 44).

Lish's narrative, which effectively announces the inevitable death of its tortured protagonist in its title, ultimately explores the same state of exception, the same regime of absolute power, the right to life and death over the occupied body, that emerged from the toxic repetitions of arbitrary power revealed by the Abu

Ghraib prison photographs. Something fatal has been released and now circulates in the American body politic, the novel suggests.

Lish's interweaving of his veteran with the life of an illegal Chinese immigrant in New York tries to extend, complicate and interleave global networks of displacement and trauma. This is admirable and ambitious, like Pitre, but again like Pitre the secret kernel of this disordered narrative conforms to an analeptic revelation of ruined bodies.

This is why I want to end on three non-American Iraq War fictions, two by Iraqi writers, that try to think about the absent or traumatically encrypted body in different ways. They are looking, I would suggest, to return the absent or silenced body to representation. Sinan Antoon's elegant and elegiac *The Corpse Washer* (2010, English translation 2013), focuses on the ritual role of the *mghassilchi*, who washes and shrouds the body of the dead before burial according to Islamic tradition. The narrator longs to be an artist and begins an art education, but the catastrophic history of Iraq since the 1980s pulls him inexorably back towards his family's trans-generational role in their Baghdad neighbourhood as corpse-washers, a job at once respected but also tabooed. Antoon's insistent focus on the dead body, the detailed and loving descriptions of the ritual washings, is self-evidently a way of restoring respect and bodily integrity to the anonymous dead, the body count of successive wars. But it is also significant that this ritual is embedded in everyday tragedy, too: the first body he washes is of a young man who has overdosed on drugs. The historical sweep, from the 1980s dominated by the Iran-Iraq War through to the American

Occupation and beyond into the factional civil war that followed, is also meant to situate the Iraqi experience outside the Western lens of the war and occupation after 2003. There is trauma here – the bodies become ever more morcellated from factional bombings, including one request to wash only the severed head that remains from an explosion – and the narrator constantly buckles under the pressure of his role. Yet the ritualized rhythms of the prose and the precise descriptions of the bodies are clearly intended as counter-memorials amidst the disaster of the mass dead. *The Corpse Washer* accedes to the literal Sebaldian demand to represent the body in history, perhaps, but also exceeds it by refusing to reduce bodies to a single vector of trauma.

Two other texts neatly deploy yet slyly subvert Western tropes of the Gothic to return to the body with rather harsher satirical intent than Antoon. Saad Hossain's *Escape from Baghdad!* (2012) and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) are set in the most brutal years of the civil war and uprising against the American occupation after the overthrow of the Baathist regime. Since the Gothic consistently stages deadly repetition and the nightmare of history's inexorable return, the formal device of reworking the Gothic tradition neatly redoubles the dread that pervades these texts.

Although superficially comparable, these are actually very different texts. Saad Hossain's intensely detailed renditions of the backstreet warrens of Baghdad and the bewildering ebbs and flows of the internecine warring factions in the Civil War are the complete inventions of a writer based in Dhakar in Bangladesh who has never visited Iraq but learnt it all online. *Escape from Baghdad!* which

received early enthusiastic online support, is frequently described as a hyperactive genre mash-up, stealing the outline of the plot of David Russell's Gulf War film *Three Kings* (1999), lashing on Quentin Tarantino-esque ultra-violence, and the war absurdism of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* or the sections set in the Zone of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, where rational order and causality are no longer quite able to function in the aftermath of 1945. It is comedy of the blackest kind, where the three protagonists are ruthless murderers, torturers and assassins, rendered inhuman by the devastating accumulated losses they suffer in a savage and limitless total war. At the heart of the book is an indestructible Angel of Death who might be a supernatural jinn or some kind of superhero, known as the Lion of Akkad. It transpires that the Lion is the immortal product of alchemical experiments conducted by a Christian Druze magician in the eighth century, who worked out how to overcome cellular death at the level of DNA a millennium before Western science. As the American army blunder through the city and the Sunni and Shia factions slaughter each other without respite, it transpires that there is a battle of centuries-old alchemists and magicians fighting for possession of the body of the Lion within this Civil War, for the Lion carries the secret of immortality partly in the strange mechanical device he carries but mainly in the very grain of his body. His augmented, customised body is offered as a biopolitical emblem of Baghdad's polymathic and multicultural learning, a golem or monster built from its secret wisdom but now finally at the end of its life. The Lion has been incarcerated, experimented upon and tortured by a succession of Baathist scientists for decades: freedom in the Civil War is no better. The book ends in a nightmare haze of violence from which only the hapless incompetents

of the tale survive, and all this hermetic knowledge of the millennia of Eastern tradition is lost in the shattered wreckage of Baghdad.

*Escape from Baghdad!* is littered with body parts, limbs severed in explosions, spooky specimens floating in medical bottles, and on one memorable occasion a torture room where an informant, still alive, has been cut into seventeen separate pieces. The horror of Victor Frankenstein's charnel-house is never far away. This is directly picked up in Saadawi's remarkable *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, written by an author who has not left Baghdad in the course of the wars since 2003 (unlike Antoon, who has been in exile for many years). Saadawi composes in the earthy slang of the city back streets, resisting the high formalism of Arabic literary prose. For breaching those conventions and its brilliant central conceit, the book won the Arab Fiction Prize in 2014.

The story is about the construction of a body by a despairing rag-and-bone man, a scavenger of the ruined city, who begins collecting body parts left in the streets after car bombings. "I made it into a complete corpse", Hadi says, "so that it wouldn't be treated as rubbish, so that it would be respected like other dead people and buried."<sup>1</sup> The novel begins with the composite corpse, oozing viscous liquids, reaching completion, the last piece, the nose, found in the street from the latest bombing and stitched on. Soon afterwards, a truck bomb erupts nearby, and the soul of a hotel guard killed in the explosion flits into the vacant body since his own has been liquefied. The grotesque constructed body mysteriously

---

<sup>1</sup> N. B. all quotations from Jonathan Wright's working manuscript translation. Page numbers to be inserted when set for English publication, late 2016/early 2017.

disappears. We then follow a journalist and investigator from a covert branch of the Baghdad police, called the Observation and Pursuit Department, who use parapsychologists, astrologers and spirit mediums to “monitor strange crimes, urban legends and superstitious rumours.” The sequence of strange deaths this team investigates turn out to be the revenge killings of the people who make up the composite body.

As in Mary Shelley’s text, the monster is given the space to speak, challenging its abject Othering. It declares itself “the only justice in this country.” Provokingly, the monster calls itself Iraq’s “model citizen... because I’m made up of body parts from people of diverse elements, ethnicities, tribes, races and social background. I represent the impossible mix that never came about in the past.” This is the body politic rendered in a way at once fantastical, grotesque and in the situation that has developed amongst the factional extremists in Iraq, provokingly literal.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was of course a secular, materialist and stridently anti-colonial book – her monster teaches itself to read with a copy of Volney’s *The Ruins, or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*. Saadawi’s contemporary transposition of the story to Iraq invokes the salvagepunk aesthetic outlined by Evan Calder Williams, who defines it as “the post-apocalyptic vision of a broken and dead world, strewn with both the dream residues and real junk of the world that was, and shot through with the hard work of salvaging, repurposing, détourning and scrapping” (19-20). It is a mode of rag-picking, pulling things out of the ruination of the contemporary. The composite formation of Saadawi’s monstrous body becomes, then, a Gothic emblem for the body that needs to be



reconstituted, that needs to count, in an era that abstracts or anonymises the bodies of the dead .

What would Sebald make of this borrowing of the generic conventions of “body horror” from Gothic fiction in these last examples? Would he have found it unacceptable to turn to a low and bastard form of literature, suspected since its origins in the eighteenth century of by-passing the heights of imagination to register in the viscera, short-circuiting cognitive responses for bodily sensation? But isn’t it entirely appropriate that it is the shiver, the flinch of the body, that returns in these fictions? For all its abstraction and apparent vanishing in the scopic regime of the “War on Terror”, here the body returns finally, demanding to be counted, remembered, honoured.

### **Works Cited**

- Amir, Maayan and Sela, Ruti (eds). *Extraterritorialities in Occupied Worlds*. Punctum, 2016. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised Edn. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Antoon, Sinan. *The Corpse-Washer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Print.
- Baer, Ulrich. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. Print.
- Barker, Martin. *A “Toxic Genre”: The Iraq War Films*. London: Pluto, 2011. Print.

Berger, John. "Photographs of Agony" (1972). *About Looking*. New York: Vintage, 1991. 41-4. Print

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

--- . *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. Print.

Chamayou, Grégoire. *Drone Theory*. Trans. J. Lloyd. London: Penguin, 2015. Print.

Chambers, Ross. *Untimely Meditations: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Print.

Dao, James. "Drone Pilots are Found to Get Stress Disorders Much as Those in Combat Do." *New York Times* (22 Feb 2013).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/23/us/drone-pilots-found-to-get-stress-disorders-much-as-those-in-combat-do.html> . Web

Derrida, Jacques. "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations'. *Philosophy in France Today*. Ed. Alan Montefiore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. 34-50. Print.

Duganne, Erina. "Photography After the Fact." *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Eds. M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards and E. Duganne. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. 57-74. Print.

Durden, Mark. "Luc Delahaye: Global Documentary." In *Deutsche Borse Photography Prize 2005* (London: Photographers' Gallery, 2005). 15-17. Print.

Eisenman, Stephen F. *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. London: Reaktion, 2007. Print.

Favret, Mary A. "A Feeling for Numbers: Representing the Scale of the War Dead." *Essays and Studies: War and Literature* (2014). 185-204. Print.

Feldman, Allen. *Archives of the Insensible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Print.

- Gallagher, Matt. "Welcome to the Age of the Commando." *New York Times* (31 January 2016). [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/opinion/sunday/welcome-to-the-age-of-the-commando.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/31/opinion/sunday/welcome-to-the-age-of-the-commando.html?_r=0).
- House, Richard. *The Kills*. London: Picador, 2013. Print.
- Hossain, Zaad. *Escape from Baghdad!* San Francisco: Unnamed Press, 2015. Print.
- Kamber, Michael. *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Print.
- Kamber, Michael and Tim Arango. "4 000 U. S. Deaths, and a Handful of Images." *New York Times* (26 July 2008). <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html>. Web.
- Kennedy, Liam. "Soldier Photography: Visualizing the War in Iraq." In *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath*. Eds. A. W. Tucker and W. Michels. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 480-5. Print.
- Lish, Atticus. *Preparation for the Next Life*. London: OneWorld, 2015. Print.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- . "Not Now, Not Yet: Polytemporality and Fictions of the Iraq War". *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation*. Eds. Monica Calvo and Marita Nadal. London: Routledge 2014. 51-70. Print.
- Malik, Suhail. "Fucking Straight Death Metal", *Journal of Visual Culture* 5/1 (2006). 107-12. Print.
- Pandey, Avaneesh. "Pentagon Releases Nearly 200 Photos Showing Detainee Abuse in Iraq, Afghanistan", *International Business Times* (6 February 2016). <http://www.ibtimes.com/pentagon-releases-nearly-200-photos-showing-detainee-abuse-iraq-afghanistan-2296945>. Web

Peebles, Stacey. *Welcome to the Suck: Narrating American Soldier's Experience in Iraq*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. Print.

Pitre, Michael. *Fives and Twenty-Fives*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.

Rainey, James. "Portraits of War, Unseen Pictures, Untold Stories." *Los Angeles Times* (21 May 2005). <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-iraqphoto21may21-story.html>. Web.

Rothstein, Adam. *Drone*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Print.

Saadawi, Ahmed. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* [currently working from Jonathan Wright's working translation, in progress – due for publication late 2016]

Saif, Atef Abu. *The Drone Eats with Me: Diaries from a City Under Fire*. Manchester: Comma Press, 2015. Print.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*. London: Picador, 2004. Print.

Schlegel, Amy. "My Lai, 'We Lie, They Die'; Or, A Small History of an 'Atrocious' Photograph." *Third Text* 31 (1995). 47-61. Print.

Sebald, W. G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Trans. A. Bell. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003. Print.

Shields, David. *War is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict*. New York: powerhouse, 2015. Print.

Sifton, John. *Violence All Around*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, 1977. Print.

--- . *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003. Print.

--- . "What Have We Done?" *Guardian* (26 May 2004), G2, 2-5. Print.

Taylor, John. *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998. Print.

Theweleit, Klaus. *Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*. Trans. C. Turner and S. Conway. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Print.

Williams, Evan Calder. *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2011. Print.