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How to cite:

Hill, Andrew (2008). Hostage videos in the War on Terror. In: Redmond, Sean and Randell, Karen eds. War Body on Screen. London: Continuum, pp. 247–262.

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Version: [not recorded]

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Hostage Videos in the War on Terror

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For audiences across the globe video footage of hostages seized by an array of groups ranged against the United States and its allies has established itself as a prominent feature of the War on Terror. The majority of these videos - and the ones this chapter will focus upon - have emanated from Iraq¹ and can be identified with a specific time period: from the spring 2004 through to the end of 2005, with the decline in their appearance coinciding with Ayman al Zawahiri (Bin Laden's 'right-hand man' and 'number two' in Al Qaeda) expressing his fears that these videos might alienate moderate Muslims².

At first sight the aim of the videos might appear relatively straightforward, with the hostage takers presenting a series of demands for the release of the hostages, focused upon the freeing of prisoners held in Iraq and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country. At times certain of these demands have been met. In July 2004 the Philippines' government agreed to withdraw their troops from Iraq in return for the release of Angelo de la Cruz. Furthermore, the financial gains to be made from seizing hostages have also become apparent, with the French, German, Italian and Canadian governments all rumoured to have struck deals with hostage takers for the release of their nationals³.

The concern of this chapter is with another aspect of these videos though: the place they occupy in the visual landscape of the War on Terror, above all in regard to the terms in which publics in the west⁴ have perceived and comprehended this conflict. The chapter takes as its focus the type of fears generated amongst these publics by these videos, fears which are juxtaposed with the, what at first glance may appear to be

¹ Whilst the vast majority of these videos have emanated from Iraq, since the invasion of the country in the spring of 2003, videos of hostages seized in Pakistan (in the case of the execution of the US journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi in February 2002), Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Gaza have also appeared. (The reference to Gaza is specifically to those non-Israeli hostages whose kidnappers have cited the withdrawal of the United States and its allies from the Middle East as a pre-condition for the hostages' release). Since the invasion of Iraq to the time of writing (December 2006), over 280 foreign nationals have been seized there (along with thousands of Iraqis), of which approximately 50 have been killed, 140 released or managed to escape, with the whereabouts of the remaining 90 unknown. See 'Abduction: scourge of Iraqi unrest', Martin Asser, *BBC News*, 30 March 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4838018.stm.

² 'Iraq's danger for foreigners', Gordon Corera, 28 November 2005, *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4479038.stm. I hesitate to identify Zawahiri's declaration as primarily responsible for the decline of these videos as other factors, such as the reduction in foreign workers in Iraq - in part due to the numbers kidnapped - are likely to have also contributed to this.

³ 'Iraq hostage believes ransom paid', *BBC News*, 31 March 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4864650.stm.

⁴ This category ('publics in the west') is necessarily somewhat schematic given the cosmopolitanism of western societies and the differing standpoints of different ethno-religious groups on the War on Terror. Whilst bearing this caveat in mind the term maintains analytical salience in designating the majority of those that constitute these publics.

contradictory desire to view this footage, including that showing the execution of certain hostages. At the same time this chapter seeks to locate these videos in dialogue with the images of US service personnel torturing and humiliating detainees in Abu Ghraib prison, that came to light in the spring of 2004. In addressing these themes the chapter takes Lacan's work - in particular its concerns with questions of seeing and questions of ontology - as a central point of reference, above all in regard to the insights it offers into the terms in which suffering, death and 'the Truth' are perceived at a visual level.

In their gaze ...

Western publics have rarely encountered representations of the Enemy's gaze whilst a conflict is taking place⁵. (Afterwards may be a different matter: witness the fetish in the UK and United States for footage shot by the Nazis for instance). Instead, deliberate efforts have been made to foreclose the awareness of the Enemy's gaze, in acknowledgment both of the fears its recognition might generate - fears of a nature that will be elaborated on in a moment - and its value as an instrument of propaganda.

Whilst in the Vietnam War - the first conflict in which media coverage can be said to have played a 'critical' role - certain images, such as Mai Nam's 1966 photograph of an United States F-105 pilot ejecting after his plane had been hit, did achieve a profile in the west, western publics were confronted with comparatively few images of the conflict as seen from a North Vietnamese standpoint. Images that became infamous in showing the United States military and its South Vietnamese allies in an unsympathetic light, such as Ron Haerberle's photographs of the 1968 My Lai massacre, or Eddie Adams' photo from the same year of South Vietnamese police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan about to shoot a Viet Cong prisoner in the head, were typically the work of western photographers or Vietnamese from the south of the country.

Where western publics have had the greatest chance of encountering the Enemy's gaze is if it depicts the Enemy as victim. (As the latter two examples from Vietnam suggest, it is 'as victim' that publics in the west are most likely to encounter representations of the Enemy in general). In the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, images of these conflicts as seen from an Iraqi perspective were, for audiences in the west, largely restricted to brief excerpts of Saddam Hussein's speeches (taken from Iraqi television), with the exception being footage of Iraqis lying wounded and dying in hospitals and medical centres, of which repeated excerpts were shown. Two principal explanations for the broadcasting of the latter material can be pointed to: its confirmation of the Enemy as victim (as subservient and defeated by the west), and a rhetoric of humanitarianism that regards footage of this nature as raising awareness of the 'horrors of war' - with the discordancy between these two explanations invoking Slavoj Žižek's doubts about 'humanitarianism' as a goal of western foreign policy since its rise to prominence in the post-Cold War era (2005). The widespread absence of encounters with the Enemy's gaze in conflicts between the west and its eastern Other - which litter the

⁵ The exception is during those of periods of occupation in World War II, where an awareness of the Enemy's gaze constituted a defining experience of being occupied.

post-World War II period and of which the War on Terror presents the latest instance - mirrors the ethno-historical dynamics of photography in general. From the medium's emergence in the nineteenth century, the foreign, the exotic, the 'oriental' Other, has assumed the position of photographed for the western photographer, with any attempt to reverse this relationship hardly recording with western publics.

It is in the light of this general absence of encounters with the Enemy's gaze that the impact these hostage videos have registered with western publics needs, in the first instance, to be located - an impact evinced in, to take two examples, the media attention accorded to these videos, and to the numbers who have sought to view them via the internet (issues that will be returned to in a moment). These videos present the comparatively novel experience of a conflict seen from the Enemy's standpoint, but they do something more than this - at the same time they situate the Enemy as aggressor. In the context of the uncertain ontological status of the Enemy in the War on Terror - the indeterminacies surrounding who precisely constitutes 'it', where 'it' is located, and what 'its' activities are - these videos establish not only that this Enemy does indeed exist, but that it possesses a gaze, that it can see, and that what it sees, confirms (graphically, in the case of those videos that show a hostage being executed) its ability to capture and kill its opponents.

How though - via what discreet processes - can the appearance of these videos be configured as presenting a threat to publics who might regard themselves as far removed from events in Iraq? Putting aside the practicalities or logistics of seeing for a moment, in establishing the presence and 'reality' of the Enemy's gaze, these videos serve - dramatically and graphically - to establish the awareness that the spectator could fall under this gaze, where previously the absence of encounters with the Enemy's gaze had served to limit the awareness of this as a possibility. Situated in these terms the spectator can be conceived as experiencing a shock akin to that Sartre ([1943]1957:259-260) identifies with the figure of the voyeur at the moment they realise that they themselves might be being watched - the realisation, as Miran Bozovic delineates in a discussion of visual perception and Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), that: 'What I have been doing to other people they can do to me - as a voyeur I myself can be seen' (1997:170). In the context of the Enemy having 'infiltrated' and 'existing within' western societies: as evident in the September 11 attacks and the subsequent attacks on Madrid (March 2004) and London (July 2005), these fears can be understood as taking on a practical, logistical reality - with these events serving to foreground an awareness that this gaze could indeed be trained upon the spectator, 'Right here, where they are', and as such the suffering they witness experienced by the hostages might indeed be inflicted upon them. (The nature of the identificatory ties between the spectator and the hostages will be explored in further detail in a moment).

... the destruction of the body

The narrative focus of these videos is upon the hostages' bodies and in those sequence of videos that culminate in the hostage's execution, the destruction of their

bodies (Figure 1). As with the presence of the Enemy's gaze the making visible of these bodies is emphasised in contrast with the relative invisibility of the wounded, the dying and the dead body in coverage of conflicts by the western media, in which body as it inhabits these states, and in particular the western body, is typically absent (Taylor 1998:157-192).

As Elaine Scarry documents in her majestic *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (1985), whilst typically elided in writing on the theory and practice of war, the body constitutes the ultimate target and last-line of violent conflict, comprising the point which the Enemy's actions are finally directed towards and which either side seeks to defend against the other (ibid.:63-81)⁶. I want now to turn to Lacan's ontological schema to illuminate the relationship between questions of seeing and the physicality of the body (and later, death) in these videos. The dimension of the body I want to pay particular attention to is its raw physicality, its status as flesh, muscle and bone, tissue and interior: the dimension of the body that can be located at the level of the Lacanian Real - the raw aspect of experience that exists beyond representation in symbolic terms. I want to place a particular emphasis upon the physicality or materiality of the Real - what might be designated the 'hard Real': a feature that whilst not directly elaborated upon by Lacan is neither precluded from the conception of the Real he develops. Indeed, one aspect of Lacan's definition of the Real is 'that which is always in its place' (1966:25), and 'that which always comes back to the same place' ([1973]1994:49), of which the material, physical world, and most intimately for the individual subject, the body, provides a primary point of reference.

Those videos that have attracted the greatest notoriety amongst western audiences are those that have culminated in the hostage's execution, most infamously by decapitation (the first of which to appear, in the context of the War on Terror, showed the execution of Daniel Pearl in Karachi in February 2002, with the first to emanate from Iraq being the execution of Nick Berg in May 2004). I want to locate these videos in terms of Philip Brophy's analysis of 'Slasher' films and realist horror from the early 1980s, and his argument that these films play not so much upon the audiences' fear of death, as anxieties around 'the destruction of the Body' (1986:8) (although the two cannot simply be separated). In order to understand this emphasis in regard to the hostage videos it is necessary to remind oneself of death's invisibility: of how a process that occurs at the level of the Real can be represented in visual terms, that, as Vivian Sobchak has asserted, 'death confounds all codes ... we do not see death on the screen' (1984:287) - a problematic that Scarry argues also occurs in the representation of physical pain (1985:3-11). The emphasis placed upon the spectacular destruction of the body that occurs in these videos can be understood as stemming from the desire to overcome or work around the problem of depicting death (and pain) at a visual level, and to do so in terms that will prove profoundly shocking to the spectator, through recourse to an act of violence of the type frequently employed in fictive cinema with the precise intention, Sobchak argues, of making death visible (1984:287-289). Conceived in these terms these

⁶ It might be contended that the material world including buildings and productive facilities constitute as significant a target - for example the World Trade Center. This is to ignore the fact that the material world is the product of human labour and relies upon this (bodily) labour to sustain it.

videos can be understood as attempting to displace death and pain from the Real, where it cannot be seen or represented, to the Imaginary, where it might be⁷. Indeed such is the brutality of what is shown in these videos that the viewer might feel taken as 'close' to the hard Real of the body and its destruction as is possible 'via' the Imaginary - as close to a traumatic encounter with the Real that Lacan designates as 'the tuché' (1994:53), (which lies at the heart of the intense shock experienced by viewers of these videos, that I will be coming on to explore in further detail below).

As Walter Benjamin noted, writing in 1931, the camera allows us to observe the world in a way and with a level of detail that is not normally otherwise possible (1985:243-244). As Susan Sontag has asserted, this includes being able to witness acts of suffering with an intimacy which would not otherwise be possible (2002:168-169): rendering these acts more terrible at a visual level than they would otherwise appear to a spectator who might never encounter them at first hand. The videos can be understood as working with an acute awareness of these capacities of the camera, exploiting them to maximise the impact they register with the spectator. The techniques employed to achieve such an impact are multiple - perhaps the most notable being the focus upon the face of the hostage, in both showing hostages pleading for their release and during their execution. The attention accorded to the face is particularly disturbing in the context of Sontag's claim that, 'with our [western] dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face' (2003:63). The face provides the principal physical features that identify an individual, to show the face of a dead person is to personalise the death in a way that renders it more intensely traumatic, with the predominance of the close-up in these videos leading, in the words of Jacques Aumont, 'the spectator to extreme psychic proximity or intimacy' (1997:103), and in so doing providing a vision of the hostages' suffering that is otherwise likely to remain - at least in terms of graphic verisimilitude - beyond the bounds of the spectator's imaginative capacities.

In dialogue: Abu Ghraib, exhibitionism

As I will be coming on to assert in a moment, the emphasis placed upon the destruction of the body in these videos bares close similarity with the images and footage of US service personnel torturing and humiliating Iraqis detained at Abu Ghraib prison, that appeared across the world's media in May 2004. The Abu Ghraib images covered acts carried out the preceding autumn, placing their production prior to the first of the videos to feature western hostages, which did not appear until April 2004. My concern is not so much with the chronology of the relationship between these videos and images though, than to suggest how they can be conceptualised in similar terms, and the type of

⁷ Zizek identifies a similar process - the displacement of a 'passion for the Real' to the creation of 'theatrical spectacle' - as a key feature of the politics of the twentieth century (2002:9). The desire to make death visible can also be identified in the case of those regimes that have sought to demonstrate their power through public executions, as surveyed by Peter Spierenburg in his study of early modern Europe (1984:43-80).

dialogue they establish at this level. In regard to the War on Terror, certain of the hostage videos appear to reference the holding of detainees by the United States at Guantánamo Bay, with the hostages seized by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad group, being dressed in orange jumpsuits, mimicking those worn by detainees at Camp X-Ray. More specifically, in the context of the occupation of Iraq, a repeated demand issued for the release of the hostages is for the prisoners at Abu Ghraib (along with other prisons in Iraq) to be released.

How then can the nature of the Abu Ghraib images be explained and conceptualised? I want to put forward a similar explanation for these images as I outlined for the hostage videos: namely that this baroque body of images of torture and brutalisation reflects above all the desire to create a spectacle of humiliation, degradation and pain, that derives from the attempt to depict psychological-emotional conditions that cannot be identified at a visual level with any certainty⁸. For, as with death (and as Scarry has asserted, as with physical pain), the ability to, with any certainty, see an individual's experience of these and other 'interior' emotional states is highly problematic. (How do we see shame or love in another? How can we, with any degree of certainty, be sure when we see these states?) As with the hostage videos and their attempt to make death visible, the multiple spectacles of torture and humiliation depicted in these images can be understood as derived from a desire to make clear at a scopic level - at the Imaginary - that this humiliation and degradation had indeed taken place, to leave whoever saw these images in no doubt that this had been achieved.

Just as the issue of seeing death lies at the heart of the hostage videos, so it figures in the Abu Ghraib images as well, despite it being obscured by the focus upon these images as presenting scenes of torture and abuse. The dead body of Manadel al Jamadi, a CIA detainee, who died on 4 November 2003 whilst being interrogated from 'blunt force injuries complicated by compromised respiration'⁹, does feature amongst the Abu Ghraib images. The possibility of other, unacknowledged killings and dead bodies appearing amongst these images needs also to be raised, particularly in light of the deaths of detainees at other detention centres in Iraq and Afghanistan¹⁰. In turn, the uncertainties around seeing death in these images emphasises the doubts around what precisely it is we see occurring in this collection of photographs - what amongst these depictions of these strange, grotesque acts is actually taking place (whilst serving at the same time to undermine the faith in the Imaginary as providing privileged access to 'the Truth' - an issue I will return to in a moment).

A comparison can be made between both the hostage videos and images from Abu Ghraib with the act of exhibitionism as conceived in psychoanalytic terms. At the kernel of the various psychoanalytic accounts of this act lies the individual's aggressive

⁸ The current affairs magazine site *Salon* has presented a comprehensive archive of these images and footage supported by a series of essays titled 'The Abu Ghraib Files', http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/introduction/ (this page provides the portal to the site's coverage).

⁹ 'The Pentagon's ghost investigation', Mark Benjamin and Michael Scherer, *Salon*, 17 May 2006, http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/05/17/ghost_detainees/.

¹⁰ 'Prosecutions and convictions - The Abu Ghraib Files', Mark Follman and Tracy Clark-Flory, *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/prosecutions_convictions/index.

attempt to assert their power (and specifically their sexual power) in defiance of a sense of powerlessness (Lucas 1990). The same desire and sense of inadequacy can be detected in the hostage videos and Abu Ghraib images. Both emanate from groups who inhabit positions of relative powerlessness. For the hostage takers this can above all be seen to stem from their being faced with the might of the US military. For the low-ranking US military personnel at Abu Ghraib this entailed being caught up in an occupation that has gone horribly wrong, with these images appearing against the backdrop of the rise of the insurgency in Iraq¹¹. (And, in regard to the psychoanalytic conception of exhibitionism, it should be remembered that images of a sexual nature form a leitmotif of this latter material). Indeed, the hostage videos and Abu Ghraib images can be situated as establishing a dialogue over who can show - who can put on display - the enemy in a more degraded state, indicating that is not enough for these acts to have taken place but that there exists the need to photograph and disseminate a record of them. This is a development that Sontag (2004), in a discussion of the Abu Ghraib images, locates in terms of an ethical myopia on the part of those US military personnel who took these photographs, borne in part out of the overriding desire to photograph and record every aspect of one's life, regardless of the ethical context - an assessment that is confirmed, she argues, by the frequency with which these personnel appear in the photos, grinning whilst carrying out these acts.

The passive spectator, figures of identification

If a type of powerlessness can be identified with both the hostage takers and the military personnel at Abu Ghraib, the position the hostages assume in the hostage videos is pervaded by a far starker sense of powerlessness, both in terms of their being captured and held, and their existing at the mercy of their captors, who decide if and when they will be released and if and when they will die. This powerlessness is mirrored in western audiences' experience of watching these videos, and the awareness this generates that there is little or nothing they can do to intervene in what they see to aid the hostages in their plight. The viewer is confronted here not so much with a recognition of the pacifying effect of images that Lacan discusses (1994:101, 109) (an aspect of his work that has been largely overlooked), and Scarry focuses upon in a discussion of US audiences and the 1991 Gulf War (1993) - rather, the spectator is faced with their inability to intervene in or do anything about the scenes they witness.

This sense of impotence is underpinned and reinforced by another dynamic as well though. Since the September 11 attacks western publics have repeatedly been reminded of their position on the 'frontline' of this conflict - via further attacks (for example the Madrid and London bombings), but also through warnings from governments, security services and the police, with, for example in March 2004, the head

¹¹ Joan Walsh 'Introduction - The Abu Ghraib Files', *Salon*,
http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/introduction/ .

of the UK Metropolitan Police calling an attack upon London ‘inevitable’¹². Despite this permanent sense of threat publics in the west have had a limited repertoire of figures with which to identify with in their position on the ‘frontline’ of this conflict, figures which might aid them in making sense of their own position in the War on Terror. The casualties of the Madrid and London bombings, and the September 11 attacks, might at first glance seem to present one such type of figure, and yet the experience of these groups is orientated towards an event that has already occurred. In contrast, the hostages in these videos present figures who (with the exception of those videos showing their execution) await their fate, and as such accord with the experience of western publics as they await whatever it is that might happen to them in this conflict. In so doing the hostage videos provide, in dramatically condensed form, a version of western publics’ own experience of awaiting the ‘next attack’.

The tie between western audiences and the hostages that appear in these videos can be configured as confirming, reinforcing and binding the spectator to an awareness of their own seeming helplessness and powerlessness in the War on Terror. As individuals typically held captive, facing their fate and dying alone, the hostage presents a figure of identification that can be positioned as contributing to the sense that the threat that confronts publics in the War on Terror is one that has, above all, to be faced at an individual level - and that as such accords with Ulrich Beck’s (1997) analysis of the individuated conception of risk more generally that circulates in contemporary western societies. One outcome of the process Beck outlines is the eroding of the notion of politics as emanating from and directed towards collective concerns. As Tariq Ali argues in *Rough Music* (2005) - his response to the July 2005 London attacks - the failure of the UK government to pay heed to the scale of opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq can be situated as symptomatic of the crisis condition democracy has reached in the United Kingdom. This sense of the futility of expecting the UK, or US, government to alter its attitude to the occupation of Iraq (and the broader conduct of the War on Terror) can be seen to have percolated down to the hostages themselves: as Roy Hallums a US citizen seized in Iraq in January 2005 stated in one video recording, ‘I’m not asking for any help from President Bush because I know of his selfishness and unconcern to those who’ve been pushed into this hellhole’¹³.

Seeing Death: *The Dead Christ, The Disasters of War*

These videos - particular those showing the execution of hostages, which I now want to focus upon - appear to have achieved significant audiences amongst western publics, who have accessed them via numerous internet sites. One explanation offered for the demand to view this footage is the desire to understand what is ‘really’ happening in

¹² ‘London Terror attack ‘inevitable’’, *BBC News*, 16 March 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/3515312.stm. Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 911* (2004) includes a sequence on how, since the September 11 attacks, the US public has repeatedly been reminded of its vulnerability to attack.

¹³ Rory McCarthy ‘Video plea by US man kidnapped in Iraq’, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2005, p.2. Although, of course, the context in which this statement was uttered must be borne in mind.

Iraq, reflecting a long running belief in the capacity of the visual to take one closer to the reality of war and conflict than the written word. As Alex Gardner declared in his *Photographic Sketchbook of the War* of 1866 (the American Civil War was one of the first conflicts to be photographed): ‘verbal representations’ of places and events ‘may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but photographic presentations of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith’ (quoted in Huppauf 1995:97). This is a sentiment echoed by Douglas Hagmann, the director of the *Northeast Intelligence Network*, whose website has provided access to the hostage videos:

The American people need to know the tactics of our enemy... All too frequently, we hear the mainstream news talk about a hostage being ‘beheaded’ by ‘militants’, ‘insurgents’ or other innocuous sounding descriptive terms ... These are acts of pure evil and savagery that must not be minimised by such references in the press¹⁴.

These attitudes are echoed by a viewer of this footage quoted in a report on videos showing hostages executed on the *BBC News* website, ‘Sure, they say on the news that twelve were killed here, five were killed there, but as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words’¹⁵. These assertions reveal a profound distrust in language - the Symbolic - to be able to come close to representing death, with the scopic, the visual, the Imaginary venerated as presenting better access to ‘the Truth’. In terms of Lacan’s ontological schema this elevating of the Imaginary to provide privileged access to ‘the Truth’ is undermined by its very negation of the Symbolic and the Real ([1975]1999:90-100)¹⁶. In different (but related) terms the problems with this faith in the Imaginary are exposed by an act such as that of Benjamin Vanderford, a US citizen, producing a fake execution video, that found its way onto Islamic militant websites, where it was taken as showing an actual execution¹⁷.

I want to argue that beyond these claims about the desire to ‘better understand’ lies another desire: that of witnessing death and the process of dying in a society in which these acts, whilst represented in countless fictional instances, (a symptom itself of the desire to witness them) are hidden away and rarely seen. Julia Kristeva’s discussion in *Black Sun* (1989) of Holbein’s painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Figure 2), raises a series of related concerns about this desire to see death. As Kristeva acknowledges, whilst death obsesses us and we hold a deep desire to witness it, seeing

¹⁴ Duncan Walker, ‘Who watches murder videos?’, *BBC News*, 12 October 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3733996.stm. *The Northeast Intelligence Network* is an independent body, whose website is subtitled ‘Information on the cutting edge - combating terrorism by investigation, research and analysis’, <http://www.homlandsecurityus.com>.

¹⁵ Walker, op cit. The report included a request for comments by those who had viewed the execution videos which were subsequently added to the report.

¹⁶ George Steiner’s (1969) argument about the ongoing devaluation of the Symbolic as a means of representing the world, can also be traced in these comments.

¹⁷ ‘FBI quiz execution video hoaxer’, 8 August 2004, *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3545822.stm.

death remains highly problematic, 'Death is not visible in Freud's unconscious. It is imprinted there, however ... by spacings, blanks, discontinuities, or destruction of representation' (ibid.:138). As she argues, the power of Holbein's painting lies in presenting such an uncompromising vision of the dead Christ, that appears to bring us so close to seeing death.

Kristeva's analysis figures as part of a study of depression, and the discussion she elaborates around Holbein's work casts light on the identificatory ties between the hostage and western publics and the position of the latter in the War on Terror. Kristeva quotes a character's comment from Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* on seeing Holbein's painting:

The people surrounding the dead man, none of whom is shown in the picture, must have been overwhelmed by a feeling of terrible anguish and dismay on that evening *which had shattered all their hopes and almost all their beliefs in one fell blow* (ibid.:109).

As I argued above, this profound sense of hopelessness can be extended to include the spectator's own position in the War on Terror when faced with these hostage videos, with the sense of how little one can do to protect oneself, how powerless one is in the midst of this conflict, standing as a leitmotif of public discourse on the conflict.

Situated in these terms the hostage videos can be understood as allowing the spectator to witness a version of their own deaths, something that is at the same time horrific and which one does not want to see, and yet one is obsessed with seeing: an ambiguity that runs throughout viewers' comments on these videos recorded on the *BBC News* website's report on the videos, and can be traced in the following statement from one such viewer (whose recourse to a moral argument to rationalise this desire is, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, not unusual):

I regularly watch the execution videos on the internet. I don't enjoy them. I watch them to get a glimpse of reality. I try to imagine myself in his position, to imagine his fear, so I can understand that killing is wrong¹⁸.

Holbein's *The Dead Christ*, despite showing a body that has been subject to profound suffering, still however presents us with a body that is venerated, and as such stands in sharp contrast to the hostages' bodies which do not possess this sanctity of status. In fact, the hostages' bodies resonate much more closely with another canonical depiction of the suffering of the human body in western art - that of Goya's later sketches and drawings, produced against the backdrop of Spain's experience of the Napoleonic Wars.

Etching thirty seven of *The Disasters of War* series titled 'This is worse' (c.1812-1815), portrays a mutilated figure, based as Victor Stoichita and Anna Marie Coderch suggest, in their study of Goya's later works, upon *The Belvedere Torso*, but with its anus

¹⁸ As collected in Walker, op. cit.

pierced on the branch of a tree. In so doing Goya can be said to offer us a vision of the classical body subject to what Stoichita and Coderch term, ‘a rhetoric of degradation and denigration’ (1999:95). This is the version of the body encountered in the hostage videos, a version that confronts the spectator with a vision of the body - so far removed from the template of the classical body - in this ruptured and brutalised state. In his *Sketchbook-Journal* Goya offers another image titled ‘We cannot look at this’ (Figure 3), that depicts the figure of an old man bound and hanging upside down from an instrument of torture. As Stoichita and Coderch suggest in commenting on this sketch, ‘the unbearable nature of the image is heightened by the fact that the torture victim ... is still imploring the heavens. But ... finds no salvation’ (ibid.:90). This is an assessment that accords closely with the position inhabited by those hostages who we now know to have been executed. It can also be extended out to include western publics more generally though, to invoke the absence of ‘salvation’ they experience in their position on the frontline of the War on Terror - uncertain of when and where the next attack might take place, and seemingly little able to alter the vulnerability of their position in this conflict.

Philoctetes: the sufferer as burden, the corpse

In *The Body in Pain* Scarry makes a number of references to Philoctetes. In Sophocles’ play Philoctetes’ response to his physical suffering and the unease this created amongst his fellow Greeks as they lay siege to Troy - whose camp ‘was never free of his frantic wailing’ ([c409BC] 1964:163) - saw him banished to a deserted island¹⁹. I want to close this chapter by raising the question of how the suffering depicted in these videos can be configured as placing the hostages in a similar position to Philoctetes. For western governments, and particularly those that collaborated in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, these videos serve as an unwelcome reminder of the suffering brought about by their actions, not only to the people of Iraq but to their own nationals. As such these videos have served as a catalyst to the doubts expressed by a significant proportion of western publics about the invasion and occupation of Iraq (and the broader conduct of the War on Terror). As I have already suggested the videos can be seen to place a burden upon western audiences, in making them vividly aware of the vulnerability of their position in the War on Terror - a burden that can be read in the comments of two different viewers of these videos:

I watched one of these videos out of curiosity. You hear time and time again on the news that someone has been beheaded. I couldn’t believe that people can be so brutal so curiosity got the better of me, I wish it hadn’t! I was close to being sick and the images are still clear in my head today, time and time again I think about what the poor man went through and how the family have to deal with knowing a loved one died in such a horrific way, it does get me upset.

¹⁹ In Sophocles’ play, the version of Philoctetes’ story that Scarry cites, Philoctetes’ suffering is caused by his being bitten in the foot by a snake in the temple of Chryse.

I had no intention of seeing this inhumane act of murder. I did watch it firstly out of curiosity, and secondly because it was easily available. On this note - I didn't think I would actually see the graphic detail that I did. I advise people not to watch this. It is very distressing and I wish I hadn't now²⁰.

Configuring the hostages as constituting a burden to publics in the west offers an alternative means of comprehending the typical refusal of broadcasters, particularly in the United States and the UK, to show the hostage videos in any level of detail (let alone the hostages' execution). The standard explanation given for this refusal is that the footage is 'too distressing', a statement that can be translated (particularly in the light of the pressure placed upon broadcasters in these countries to support their government's actions), in terms of the burden the viewer would feel from viewing this footage as being likely to intensify doubts about the invasion of Iraq - and again by extension the wider War on Terror.

The question of the seen and the unseen returns us to the physicality of the body and its status at the level of the hard Real. From the War on Terror (a conflict of the present), back to western culture's 'first' conflict (the siege of Troy), might at first glance seem a great distance, but the target of each is the same: the destruction of the body. Philoctetes, Holbein and Goya's work and the hostage videos and images from Abu Ghraib appear at first glance to present us with very different depictions of suffering, the body in pain, tortured, being killed and in death. Each though invokes a constant referent that stands beyond the bounds of representation at the Imaginary or the Symbolic - the hard Real of the body - and in its dead form the corpse. Returning again to Lacan's conception of the Real as 'that which is always in its place' (1966:25), and 'which always comes back to the same place' (1994:49), the hard Real of the body-corpse serves as a reminder that across time and space, across history and locale, the act of war results in the brutalisation of bodies and the production of corpses. And it is the corpse that presents the final object of this chapter, the final material presence of combat, that cares not for how it is represented and depicted, but constitutes the incontrovertible, detritus of war.

²⁰ Both quotes are from Walker, op cit.

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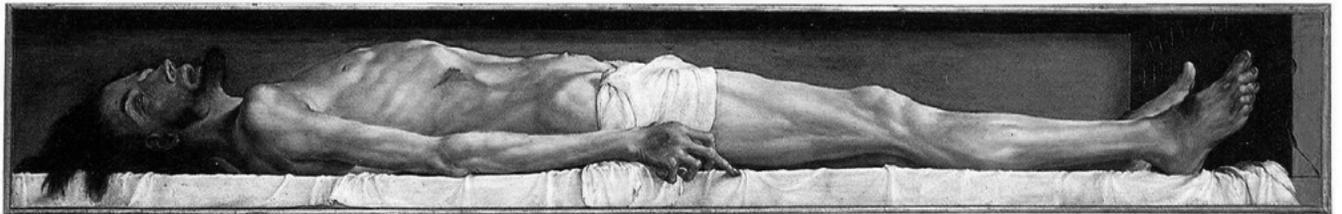
Images

Figure 1



Video capture of US hostage Eugene Armstrong, executed by the Tawid and Jihad group in September 2004.

Figure 2



Hans Holbein the Elder
The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb
1521
Oil on wood
Kunstmuseum, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basle

Figure 3



Francisco Goya
'We cannot look at this', Drawing C101 *Sketchbook Journal*
1814-1824
India ink wash on paper
Museo del Prado, Madrid