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Memory, photography and the politics of abuse: The ambiguous nature of photography

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Abstract

Critical commentary on Australian artist Bill Henson's work including the series Untitled 1994-1995 which represented Australia at the Venice Biennale is frequently framed within the discourse of the 'white cube'. Its contextualisation in predominantly art historical and formalist perspectives tends to operate as a mechanism that denies affective and embodied dimensions of meaning making. Much the same could be said of the work of Marian Drew who uses road kill in her photographic still life works. However, the 'distancing' in these works is also achieved through historical allusion, which at the same time reactivates the flow of emotional empathy and desire. In this paper, I ask the question: "What distinguishes the work of these two artists with media images of torture?"

My attempt to address this question will involve a narrative re-reading of selected works of Henson and Drew incorporating notions of affect, identification, memory and desire as processes which operate non-discursively, but which are inseparable from memory and lived experiences. This will permit a double exposure of the work of these artists. Within a psychoanalytical context, my re-reading will be used to extend an understanding of the now familiar press and Internet images of the torture of Iraqi prisoners.

As a metaphor for desire and ideology, photography operates within manifest and latent registers. I will argue that certain forms of photographic practice may be understood in terms of a politics of abuse — instantiating an uneven differentiation of power between actants, the winning (forcefully or otherwise) of consent or complicity, the silencing of refusal of resistance and/or the incriminating of the 'victim' — whilst at the same time upholding the claim of verisimilitude and aesthetic or ethical intent. Critical engagement with such practices is crucial to an understanding of the relationship between institutional discourses, trauma and abuse in contemporary society.

Keywords

affect; memory; desire; trauma; photography.

The ambiguous nature of photography

The camera has been described by Roland Barthes as a visual clock in the service of memory recording and storing events as personal history, and by Susan Sontag, as a weapon of predatory activity. The ambiguity of photography lies in its claim to 'truth' in representing reality whilst at the same time operating as a metaphor for desire and fantasy. Louis Althusser's theory of ideology (1971) suggests that ideologies and institutional discourses are also implicated in fantasy. Since the images to be discussed here derive their power and seduction from the ideologies and discourses that surround them, this double articulation or ambiguity is intensified permitting them to be viewed through the lens of what I term a "politics of abuse". This operates through the following dynamics inherent in the viewing process: a fluid movement between manifest and latent meanings engendered by the images; the constantly shifting and interchangeable relationships between seduction and resistance that occurs at the point of reception, and the way this structures the victim/perpetrator and maker-addressor/ viewer- addressee positionalities that emerge both within the images and through the viewing process. My aim in this analysis of the photographic works of Bill Henson and Marion Drew and internet images of the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib is to question conventional hierarchies that continue to influence debates about the potential uses and abuses of photography in art and the media. In doing so I hope to extend an understanding of the dynamics of trauma and abuse in contemporary society.

Images are representations, and as such they are producers of ideology even as they evoke pleasure and allow us to articulate both conscious and unconscious or repressed desires. The question of who derives power and pleasure from images is related to issues of address and reception. Address relates to how images construct the subject as an idealised viewer who produces "preferred" readings; whereas reception refers to a potential or "real" viewer who may resist the interpolative power of the image and produce alternative or resistant readings. In many instances, institutionalised discourses—gallery catalogues, reviews and other commentaries operate as additional devices through which preferred readings are structured and endorsed. Hence, critical discourses as well as the context of viewing produce differential power relations between the addressor and addressee. This has certainly been the case for work of Bill Henson's untitled series that represented Australia in the Venice Biennale of 1995.

My reading of these works revolves around the way in which narrativity is implicated in the artist's use of cinematic devices. It will also involve an application of what Mieke Bal has referred to as 'visual rhetoric' or the ambiguity of painterly texts, which engender the production of narrative meanings (Bal, 1991:93). It is an attempt to exercise what may be described an act of refusal, which requires becoming, 'a resisting rather than an assenting reader' (Felman, 1993:4). The narrative impetus in Henson's work is often

ignored in favour of formalist and art historical readings that tend to maintain a focus on the contexts of production of artworks rather than particularities of reception, and hence privilege a specified set of intertextual allusions over less predictable “intertextualities” that may arise when works are encountered by wider audiences.

Ovid’s story of Tereus’ rape and subsequent silencing of Philomela by cutting off her tongue (Baldick et al: 1976) provides a useful springboard for understanding narrative structures that relate to Bal’s notion of visual rhetoric. This story is structured by a regime that incorporates the following features: an uneven differentiation of power between actants; the gaining (forcefully or otherwise) of consent or complicity; the silencing of dissent and the overpowering of resistance. Sandra Butler (1985) has observed a similar configuration in her analysis of child abuse, which she suggests, follows a pattern of unavoidable complicity, silencing, invalidating of resistance and/or incriminating of the victim. In Ovid’s myth, Philomela is unable to reveal that she is not guilty of adultery with her sister’s husband, because she is transformed into a songbird, whose melody, though sweet and eternal, renders actual events and characters “unrepresentable”. As Michel Foucault has observed, power can be viewed as the way in which certain actions modify others. Power seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely (Foucault, 1981: 789). The ultimate deployment of this absolute or extreme form of power is physical force or violence, which has largely been superseded by disciplinary discourses and the way in which they are structured in society through mythologies and other institutional practices. This can be demonstrated in certain commentaries that surround Henson’s work.

Edward Scheer (1998: 29) combines his review of Henson’s untitled 1991-1995 photographs with an analysis of violence in Rowan Wood’s film *The Boys*. In his review, Scheer’s acknowledgement of violence in these works, is juxtaposed, with reference to Hannah Arendt’s observation that violence appears when power is in jeopardy. In Scheer’s analysis, the textual shift from notions of violence as an attempt to regain power, to one of violence as a means of recuperating masculine identity is partially achieved through an appropriation out of context, of material from elsewhere—that is to say—the gaining of complicity of Arendt, an appeal to authority that confers power to the addressor. A deft movement in the commentary, from Wood’s film to Henson’s photographic works, completes the textual transcription by which violence discursively achieves the status of the sublime through its un-representability: “They [Henson’s photographic works] offer a perspective on violent death as that which cannot be represented” (Scheer, 1998: 29).

The question of subjective agency is raised by the silencing mechanisms operating in discourses such as that in which Scheer’s review can be placed. Moreover, his use of “we” in commenting on what cannot be said of Henson’s images presumes a common perspective and a shared response with respect to the works he discusses. Later in this review, Scheer quotes Cioran:

With age we grow accustomed to our terrors, no longer willing to do anything to break away from them, we make ourselves at home in the abyss. (Scheer, 1998: 29)

The context of the gallery together with the technical processes involved in making images and the discourses that surround the images constitute a scopic regime or a field in which certain forms of power operate to produce prescribed modes of seeing whilst negating other modes of perception. There is a thematic resonance here, with Jill Bennett's account of trauma imagery in art. Bennett suggests that in its dematerialised and sublimated form, trauma becomes a set of psychic functions and is not part of experience except in an abstract sense. For Bennett, the artist's appropriation of trauma as psychic function operates as a distancing device allowing sensation to be cut off from the specificities of character and narrative action. Trauma, or the sensations related to trauma are hence to be put to equipmental use by the artist in order to trigger a more distanced empathetic vision as opposed forms of empathy that might be triggered in identificatory processes evoked through narrative elements.

Bennett's account moves us away from the idea of art as an interpersonal transmission of experience (of trauma), to one of art as a process that gives rise to critical reflection *about* trauma. (Bennett, 2006:7). This form of theoretical abstraction detracts from acknowledging that affect and sensation are tied to real bodies and particular histories. Moreover, as Bal (1995) has aptly demonstrated in her account of word/image relationships, the viewing of images inevitably gives rise to narrative meaning, which in turn is apprehended in relation to particular memories and histories of a material and sentient viewer.

This blind spot of theoretical abstraction can be seen to operate in primarily formalist and art historical discourses surrounding Henson's works. Such discourses have had a tendency to negate alternative interpretations through what Bal has elaborated as the framing or reframing of images through a "retelling" by a specific material viewer, that can realise meanings not accessible before the reframing (Bal, 1996:32). Bal shows us that a process of *narrative production* occurs in the viewing of visual images. Visuality, imagination and identification intertwine in the act of viewing to produce what Bal refers to as visual storytelling that emerges in relation to the viewer's own memory and experience. It relates to situated meanings that emerge at the point of reception and is concerned with the question, not only of who is doing the "speaking" but also with the differential and particular meanings, affects and sensations produced by those who "hear".

Henson's works from the series named *Untitled* represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1995. The exhibition in question consists of over a dozen massive photographic images (most of them 200.1 x 244.5 cm) depicting a twilight forest scene of abandoned cars. Gamin-like, naked figures inhabit the twilight landscape: two deathly figures entwine ambiguously in acts of violence or sex; a female figure is dragged naked

by the hair; another lies—legs akimbo with what appears to be blood splattered between her thighs, her neck in an unnaturally twisted position suggestive of violent death. However, the contextualisation of these images in the rarefied locations of major galleries acts immediately to constrain and shape what can be said about them. Brian O’Doherty (1986) has described the phenomenon of the Gallery as ‘white cube’. The gallery is a white, ideal space which subtracts from the art work any cues that interfere with the fact that it is “art” and separates the work from anything that would detract from the work’s own evaluation of itself. The gallery exudes the sanctity of the church and the formality of the courtroom tending to construct the spectator as a disembodied eye, a faculty that relates exclusively to formal visual means and is immersed only in those ideas surrounding the work that have been circulated via critical discourses sanctioned by the institution. “It censors out the world of social variation, promoting a sense of the sole reality of its own point of view, and, consequently its endurance or eternal rightness” (McEvilley, 1986:9). Let us look at some of the comments that have constructed such a point of view with regard to Henson’s work.

Isobel Crombie in the gallery brochure comments:

Bill Henson beguiles his audience with images that are of a confronting, but strangely beautiful world.... His photographs are curiously non-intrusive... Henson’s figures remain both anonymous and essentially inviolate apparently acting according to their own desires and needs...The ritualistic appearance of their activities is not violent; there is a sensual slowness to what is happening that makes it more like a dream experience... (Crombie, 1995: 9)

If the reader is confronted with a conception of death as the ultimate dream experience; a question that arises is “Who is doing the dreaming and to what realities might the dreamer(s) awake?”

Henson himself has stated that, in as much as the figures remain apart from any specific identity, they belong to a dream or fantasy world and remain essentially inviolate (Henson, 1995). The separation of these works from lived reality is achieved through distancing discourses that negate the manifest visual rhetoric of the works. His collage technique of tearing the paper has been described as the trace of the artists labour “marking the force of the unrepresentable” (Scheer, 1998: 29), or as a formal element of composition, “punctuation points dividing the planes of the pictures ” (Crombie, 1996: 13). In the Biennale Catalogue (1995), Crombie devotes a great deal of space to the discussion of technique and formal elements in the works, to Henson’s careful eye for composition, which, she suggests, produces a “satisfying unity between the various components of the overall work” (Crombie, 1995:13). Then, there is mention of Classical and Romantic allusions, which combine to produce a sense of “otherworldly creatures” (Crombie, 1995:14). Landscape and figures have similarly been read with reference to a long line of Renaissance and post-Renaissance ‘masters’. If there is any story in such accounts, it is that of the artist’s heroic progress through the history of art.

Taken to its logical conclusion, Crombie's focus on formal elements reduces realistic representations of the human form to patches of colour or the abstracted chiaroscuro effects of shadow and light. The body in this context is transformed into, or becomes continuous with the landscape that surrounds it, a *terra nullius* to be mastered and emptied of any landmarks that may distinguish it in terms of a specific time and place or of an historical identity prior to its incorporation in the artist's vision. The manifest content of this critical discourse works to negate or repress latent meanings that a narrative reading would allow.

And yet there are those who feel assaulted by these images. Indeed my own initial engagement with them evoked a violent nausea and an involuntary outrage similar to that experienced in my first reading of the tale of Philomela. It would seem that these works are affective and affecting in ways that go beyond what is made available in the critical accounts discussed and what lies beneath the intentional structuring of the work in relation to prior artistic practices.

Sontag rightly observes that the sanctity of photographs is derived from a continuing sense that they are indexes of the people they represent. This is evidenced the way in which there is a reluctance to discard or destroy them. If one applies the formalist approach to the catalogue image (Number 12) where the tearing or cutting of the paper extends from the figure's pelvic bone and across the pubic region, the sense of sexual violation and amputation realised through the precise positioning of the cut or tear are rendered inadmissible. And yet the rhetoric of the image is insistent in its production of this recognition of violence—highlighting the blind spot of formalism in its refusal to admit that the reading of images is seldom free of experiential and social contexts.

Let me turn now from the content of the images, to the curatorial process involved in the staging of this exhibition in 1997 at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery in Perth, where I first encountered Henson's works. In order to access the exhibition, viewers were required to pass through a black-curtained entry similar to that found at the entrance of a peep show or cinema auditorium. In retrospect I am able to note the ease with which the first act of complicity was won. (I remember too, that there were no warnings signs outside—such as those that were placed at the entrance to Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition at The Art Gallery of Western Australia some months earlier.

Inside the gallery it is dark. The only available light appears to be emitted by the works themselves drawing the viewer closer in order to decipher the images, and then directing the viewer around the walls from image to image.

The viewing space is structured like a cinema auditorium producing an illusion of what Laura Mulvey has described as voyeuristic separation (Mulvey, 1981:208). The darkness separates the audience from the screen and from other viewers producing a sense of self-contained voyeuristic pleasure. Paradoxically, there is a temporary loss of ego in the fantasy of the film, and at the same time, a construction of ego ideals via identification.

This identification involves the ego's desire to fantasise itself in a certain active manner — sometimes involving cross-gendered identification — or else it may involve the desire to be desired. Henson's setting up of the exhibition in such a manner may be read as an additional means of evoking a sense of separation of the works from lived reality; of placing it within the self-referential dream world of the images and their formalist concerns. However the structure of the viewing space *also* triggers a narrative impetus, which implicates desire and identification in the act of viewing.

The need to accustom one's eyes to the darkness means that one finds oneself very close to the images before being able to make out any detail. Further complicity is thus unavoidable. A story unfolds. In true Proppian fashion, the female forms are passive, being done to, having been done to; the male forms are active, doing, moving in the frame, and from frame to frame, finding something else to do, someone else to do it to. The forest in twilight is reminiscent of scenes in the movie *Mad Max* and reports of grisly acts of murder in the Nangarra forest on the outskirts of Perth; but the catalogue insists that these images have no connection with any reality. This permits the work to operate through the illusion of what Donna Haraway once described as the 'god trick' — the presentation of a view from nowhere or from everywhere — which in either case amounts to claims of possessing 'the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation' (Haraway, 1991:188) On viewing the works, one is initially struck by the sheer scale and sublimity of the landscape backdrops, but as the figures emerge sensation and memory produce an abjection that (in my case) results in gagging.

Alice Miller in *Banished Knowledge* (1990:55) tells us how Freud's theory of infantile sexuality recast patient's reports on sexual abuse as sheer fantasies attributable to their instinctual wishes. Is it possible (beyond hysteria) that there is some connection between Freudian discourse and the discourse of the white cube as it is revealed through the staging of these works? How might audiences not trained in art theory and history view them? Jill Bennett argues against Geoffrey Hartman's view that images of violence have the capacity to engender secondary trauma. She suggests that the notion of images returning viewers directly to the scene of trauma are inadmissible in films and artworks, since artistic images are not re-presentations of real events. Hence according to Bennett, the shock engendered by graphic images is registered by a "third party" or "disinterested viewer". This is the shock of art that leads to critical thought rather than "crude emotionalism". (Bennett, 2005). Two points relating to aesthetic experience and trauma counter this notion of disinterestedness. In aesthetic experience, affective responses result not in a sense of separation, but in dissolution of self; self and other become co-extensive and this is the basis for identification, which involves a return to the ego and to language. The sign is continually remade at the borderline of the psyche and the outside world, and the image is determined by whose image it is, that is, for whom it signifies. However, in cases of extreme shock or trauma, there is an inability to access the language and distance required

for identification to take place or for critical thought to take hold. That this can and does occur in some encounters with images indicates there is no “third party”—the viewer is returned to the “other” as self—to the scene of *primary* trauma (This may be more clearly understood in relation to Julia Kristeva’s account of to abjection in Julia Kristeva, 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.). Such an understanding of the dynamics of viewing does not imply the need for censorship of art, but for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of censorship itself—particularly as it relates to debates and discourses surrounding trauma and abuse and the potential uses and abuses of images in art and the media.

2. Marian Drew

Similarly to Henson’s 1995 series, Marian Drew’s photographic works from the 2003 *Australiana* Series are derived from installations of road kill animals which are arranged and photographed as still life images following the tradition of Romantic and Dutch still life or *vanitas* paintings. This appropriation contextualises the works within an historical tradition and is used as a device to structure the viewer’s engagement.

The aesthetic seduction of Drew’s images from the 2003 *Australiana* series belies the works more macabre origins and its underlying ideological content. Wolfgang Haug (1987) describes the aestheticisation of objects as a process that increases their desirability on the basis of appearance. The appearance or semblance of beauty of one thing can be separated aesthetically and attached

to other things so that surface appearance becomes different to “real” appearance. This aestheticisation of objects stimulates human sensuousness and structures the viewer’s response. Such strategies are most commonly used in the advertising of commodities and achieved through the specific technical means of photography. The striking colours and pristine beauty of Drew’s works is a source of immediate aesthetic pleasure. What distinguishes these works from that of Henson is that they are not only desirable objects of beauty but also operate overtly, as bearers of ethical or ideological messages. The manifest message concerning pride mortality, and the ecstasy of death and decay locate the work in art historical and formalist discourses as mentioned above. However the viewer is drawn into the works, by the coloured surfaces and identification with familiar or domestic objects. It is only after the viewer’s acceptance of the invitation to look and take pleasure, that the animals in the images take form as nameable objects, as *corpses*. When this happens in the case of Drew’s work, one is not confronted with the abject but with the uncanny—something familiar has become dislocated and alienated by being made visible. (Freud 1955). The sightless eyes and twisted postures of the creatures render them passive and vulnerable, but also accusatory. The viewer is shifted from the place of looking (a private

place) to the place of being looked at, which is also a movement from innocence to a sense of shame and fear. In terms of power, the dynamics involved in viewing are similar to “politics of abuse” that I have suggested characterises the deployment of power in photographic practices. The viewer is implicated in the fate of the animals, only *after* the pleasure of looking has been won.

The issue of ‘gaze’ is pertinent here. Theories of the gaze have traditionally posited the spectator of images as having more power than the person or object being looked at. This notion is tied up with ideas concerning desire and agency. However, contemporary accounts derived from feminist theory and practice show that this does not always follow. The tables are turned where power is conferred on objects or persons within images, through the capacity to return the gaze. As has already been shown in relation to Henson’s images, other means of conferring power to objects being looked at include surrounding institutional discourses that bestow ‘invisible’ power to the addressor from sources outside of the spectator/image scenario. Drew’s subjects (the road kill animals) and hence her images, derive part of their power from the growing impact of environmental and conservation discourses which take them beyond the meanings of traditional still life images. This “non-diegetic” influence deployed through the photographic images, anchors the act of viewing within a broader social context. In Drew’s paintings, the animals depicted can be said to return the disciplinary gaze of discourse as well as the omnipotent gaze of the dead. There is a potential here not only for the spectator to be fascinated and/or subjugated by fear, but the images also evoke an ethical and empathetic response. Hence, a balance is maintained between the tensions of affective and critical engagement.

The ambiguity of both Henson’s and Drew’s works may not only be understood in terms of unconscious fears and desires but also through an understanding of the sublime. Edmund Burke’s account of the sublime experience suggests that it is not evoked by beauty, but by fear. Whilst fear in Burke’s account was essentially understood as an external force, it could be argued that like trauma, it emanates from the physicality of the body. Emily Lutzker contends that in the aporia of postmodern living, the remaining fixed element of being is confirmed through the sublime experience, which is a reminder of the physicality of the body (Lutzker, 1999). In Drew’s work, the reminder of this physicality is aligned with the critical and social dimensions of the underlying message. A “traumatic” awakening that occurs on closer inspection, implicates the viewer in the death of the creatures represented in the images and at the same time, the viewer is placed in relation to death as a common fate of all living things. This structuring set up an ethical relationship between self and other. Affect or sensation in this instance, operates through an aesthetics that is also an attribution of value.

3. Images of Torture

The publication of images of the torture of Iraqi prisoners in the mass media and the Internet places them in a much larger arena of spectatorship and within more varied and complex networks of discourses. My concern in turning to these images is again related to the way in which power is deployed through the addressor/addressee relationship and how the dynamics of images and the discourses from which they emerge serve to seduce and then, to subjugate dissent by effacing a specific and material viewer.

Paul Frosh suggests that photography is a constitutive type of visible action within the social world—“a manifest performance of the power to make visible” (Frosh, 2001:45) Its use in the media and public realm is related to the power and the right of the viewer to see: ‘Photography as the agent of public visibility must be seen to ‘serve’ the sovereign viewer, at which point the roles of the voyeur and the informed citizen combine’ (Frosh: 2001:50). In this context of mutual implication, it becomes difficult to conceive of a locatable resistant practice of viewing. The public’s right to information and to see is an aspect of what Guy Debord has described as the society of the spectacle promoted by technologies that blur public and private boundaries and where there is an assumption that individuals want to look (Frosh 2001:49). The web of practices and relationships of public image production produces viewers as mass consumers of images—a public realm of the citizen voyeurism where participation in civic life and looking and the personal and political are mutually entwined. Rosalind Krauss has noted that the family photograph is an instrument or agent of the collective fantasy, of family cohesion, ‘part of the theatre that the family constructs to convince itself that it is together and whole’ (Krauss, quoted in Marsh 2003: 86). It can be argued in the context of Frosh’s discussion that dissemination of images the Iraqi torture images operate similarly.

We have learned from Foucault that power is most effective when it is invisible and unverifiable. However, power relations also have an immediate hold on the body—marking it, training it, investing it with desire, forcing it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies and to emit signs. This now applies at a macro level whether one is a producer or viewer of images. The photographs of tortured Iraqi prisoners operate not only through the inherent ambiguity of the photographic medium itself, but also through slippery relations of power and desire and the systems of repression these engender. The deployment of these images of torture exemplify the validation of certain kinds of institutional knowledge and power. They also operate as thinly disguised gratification of barely repressed desires of individuals who produce, disseminate and consume them. Within the context of current US regime and attitudes, and a general fascination with images of the violent and the macabre, it could be argued that there is no longer any real distinction between the workings of individual repressed desire and fantasy and regimes of social discourse. The repressed has not

only returned, but is openly appropriated to justify political and other ends. These images may be said to be indirectly if not explicitly endorsed by the “axis of evil” discourse which operates through both manifest and latent registers.

Whether one subscribes to this discourse or not, the images themselves, and their mode of deployment constitute an open invitation for audiences to look. Because any position to be taken by the viewer must first involve an act of complicity of looking, the viewer is placed in a voyeuristic relation to the scenes that are presented. In the case of one Internet site, overt invitations to look imply an already won complicity or shared perspective:

toture [sic] Rape Pics - BEST SITE
 YOU GOT TO CHECK IT OUT!!! YOU WILL BE IMPRESSED &
 SHOCKED! Enter and Enjoy! Toture
 Rape Pics - Best Site. ... Toture Rape Pics Free Rape Wedding Pictures. ...
 toture-rape-pics.41pic.com/main.html - Similar pages
 Warning! take a look at you own risk ! Photos of the rape. An other one. ...
 www.rundom.com/karim2k/archives/001236.html - 10k - Cached - Similar pages

In other cases the interpolative dynamic draws its power through a quasi appeal to authority revealed in apologies for blurring and cropping of photos and gratuitous descriptions of what has been censored in the images with respect to their broader publication. The viewer is entreated to enter on what manifestly presents as ideological or ethical pretext. However, the message’s focus with what has been repressed or omitted from the images reveals a latent voyeuristic impetus.

The images below are from the original 60 Minutes II broadcast. CBS says that it has twelve of these photographs, though there are dozens more. Among them:

The Army has photographs that show a detainee with wires attached to his genitals. Another shows a dog attacking an Iraqi prisoner.

(Note: Blurring of the photos was done by CBS.)

The images below are from the New Yorker’s website [here]. Be sure to read their article, “Torture at Abu Ghraib” by Seymour Hersh. (Note: Blurring of the photos was done by the New Yorker.)

The images below are from the Washington Post’s website [here]. (Note: All photos except the top one were cropped by the Post, presumably to avoid display of genitals.)

On entering the site, viewers are presented with some images that structurally resemble earlier genres of visual anthropology and travel photography. Others parody holiday snapshots in ways that trivialise and negate the violence that is represented. In the invitation to look set up by the interpersonal modality of address, the images function,

as a form of orientalism, eliciting complicity through codes of dominance and subjugation that establish difference and fix categories of self and other. As such, they are intended to manipulate unconscious fantasies and fear. The victims in these images are not only deprived of sight and the power to return the gaze, in Freudian terms their hooded heads signify castration. Hence at both conscious and unconscious levels the images promote identification with the perpetrators.

Hard-edged photography rather than the aestheticising and distancing qualities often used in art photography adds to impersonalisation and dehumanisation of the subjects depicted. The underlying dynamics of seduction operating here, rest on the claim of a direct relation to a shared reality into which the viewer is placed by the act of looking.

In this analysis I have tried to show that images manipulate the addressor/addressee positions in differential relations of power (and voyeuristic pleasure). This is related to the dynamics of looking and contexts and discourses that surround viewing practices. In addition, the structuring of images through technical means works to control and limit the gaze of the viewer that determine power relations in ways that tend to privilege the addressor positionality. I suggest that an understanding of these dynamics underpins the ambiguity of photographic practices in both art and the media. These processes are also related to the ambiguity of photographic practices, which in some contexts, make them ready instruments of a politics of abuse.

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