3.

After The Fog of War: Frames, Failure and Rehabilitating Myths

In the darkness, we hear doors closing distantly and see faint shapes moving. A voice calls out in a loud whisper: "Osama… Osama… Osama". The image cycles through the darkened room and a behind-right point of view night-vision image of a US Navy Seal, scanning a doorway with a laser-sighted assault rifle. A door opens and the rifle fires on a barely-visible figure, which falls to the ground. Several heavily armed and camouflaged Navy Seals now raid the room, where two women in nightdresses cry out in distress and a male body lies dead and bleeding. More shots are fired into the lifeless body: "We've got a possible jackpot"; "Roger that, a possible jackpot." Some of the Navy Seals attempt to establish the identity of the man, and then squadron team leader 'Patrick', actor Joel Edgerton, takes four photographs with an ordinary digital snapshot camera of the male body lying on the floor. We never directly see the subject of the photograph, but from a point of view over Patrick's left arm, we do see three of the images on the camera's back viewfinder screen. The body in the photographs is bleeding from the upper face, head twisted slightly to the right. A low dramatic note now increases the weightiness of the moment and we hear a disembodied voice declare: "This is Red Zero Two. Geronimo, for God and Country, Geronimo." This scene in the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012, released in the United States on 19 December 2012, is the intense climax of Kathryn Bigelow's two-and-a-half-hour cinematic portrayal of the manhunt and killing of Osama bin Laden. The opening frame of the film primes us with the caption: 'Based on first-hand accounts of actual events', and two hours and eighteen minutes later it makes good on the visual promise heavily implied in that caption: a photographic image of bin Laden dead.

On 2 May 2011, a year and a half before the release of *Zero Dark Thirty*, and within hours of the actual Navy Seal raid on bin Laden's base, a Pakistani television network ran a very similar image, which it claimed was bin Laden dead. Other television networks and news websites immediately picked up on this image and reproduced it. Britain's *Daily Mail* ran the image next to a picture of the World Trade Center towers burning.[1] Sky News broadcast the same image shown on Pakistani television and asked the expert opinion of Bob Ayres, whom they identified as a "former CIA agent and international security expert".[2] After Ayres explained the scientific veracity of facial recognition, the Sky presenter asks, "Do you think that's the man?"; Ayres responded, "It certainly looks like him."[3] Sure enough, the image does *look* like him: it shows his characteristic beard and mouth, partly open, with the top part of the face a different skin tone, smeared with blood, with glazed lifeless eyes. Yet the contrast between the top and bottom parts of the image is striking: the skin tones don't match and differences in the image resolution and contrast are obvious. The angle of the chin is unaligned with that of the forehead. Within

Composite/fake digital image of the dead Osama bin Laden

hours of its widespread use by the news media, the two images from which this one was composited went viral on the internet. In fact, this poorly constructed composite image had been circulating on the internet as early as 29 April 2009.[4] What is astounding is that this image so clearly possesses all the classic symptoms of a poor Photoshop job, with mismatched tones and resolution and poor 'feathering' from one composite layer to the next. Nevertheless, the thirst for what this image represented was clearly overwhelming, momentarily blinding news media and security experts.

After the debunking of the 'bin Laden dead' image, Pete Souza's photograph of the White House Situation Room taken during the mission on 1 May 2011 took its place in the media as the popular visualisation of the historic moment of the death of bin Laden. The photograph depicts the crowded Situation Room. Brigadier General Marshall B. Webb, at the centre, appears to be in control, looking down at his laptop and not towards an unseen screen out of view, to the left of the camera frame. Around the table, amongst others, are US President Barack Obama, leaning forward and staring intensely at the screen, echoing the gaze of Vice President Joe Biden, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clasps her right hand over her mouth (arguably the *punctum* of this image). Despite the tension that this photograph captures, it contains its own important failings that make it unfit for the purpose for which it was released. The unseen object of their gazes, reflected so intensely in the

President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden, along with members of the national security team, receive an update on the mission against Osama bin Laden in the Situation Room of the White House, 1 May 2011.

clear affectivity of their faces, sharpened by Clinton's clasping hand, only reinforces the sense of frustration and the desire for *that* image. We imagine Obama, Clinton and the fourteen others are engaged in the spectacle which the rest of the world has been denied.

As this image also failed to satisfy a particular emotional need of the audience, pressure in the American media demanded that President Obama authorise the release of *real* images of a dead bin Laden. Interviewed by Steve Kroft on *60 Minutes* on 4 May 2011, Obama said, "It is important for us to make sure that very graphic photos of somebody who was shot in the head are not floating around as an incitement to additional violence. As a propaganda tool."[5] The Associated Press, Fox News, NPR, CBS News, Reuters and others attempted to access the images via the Freedom of Information Act, but their requests were denied and the images never came.[6] Writing in *The Times*, Roger Boyes articulated the thirst for this image: 'The President has failed to understand the iconography of power and, in retrospect, withholding the pictures, however grisly, will be seen as a weak rather than [a] graceful decision.'[7] It took less than two years for *Zero Dark Thirty* to formulate and deliver to its audience this 'iconography of power', the money shot we never got to see. The movie's 'real' images of bin Laden, on the back viewfinder of the squadron team leader's camera even echo that first fake image broadcast on Pakistani television on 2 May 2011, as if to salvage something from its failure.

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In Chapter One, I discussed the power of the photographic image as a 'document' and how, it has been argued, our faith in its factual truth is founded on the principal of its 'indexicality'. I discussed how photography is different from other visual media that preceded it because its image is produced by the direct impression of light; as Susan Sontag says, 'An image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens', and therefore understood as factual.[8] I also discussed how Sontag argues that nevertheless when it comes to images of war, factuality takes second place to the ideological demands of the audience.[9] At the beginning of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag considers the argument put forward by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* that, confronted by images of war, we all feel the same gut-wrenching universal human sense of horror. This commonly shared response to images of suffering is, according to Woolf, the most powerful counter-argument to the inevitability of war in Europe when it was published in 1938. Sontag disagrees: 'To an Israeli Jew, a photograph of a child torn apart in the attack on the Sbarro pizzeria in downtown Jerusalem is first of all a photograph of a Jewish child killed by a Palestinian suicide-bomber. To a Palestinian, a photograph of a child torn apart by a tank round in Gaza is first of all a photograph of a Palestinian child killed by Israeli ordnance. To the militant, identity is everything.'[10] Despite how desperately we might wish it otherwise, the empathy Woolf expects requires the right context and certain conditions that are agreeable to us. So, rather than evoking any universal compassion, Sontag says, 'photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus.'[11] Think here of the centrality of images in the War on Terror: The World Trade Center towers on fire, the Abu Ghraib photographs of prisoner abuse and the low-resolution internet videos of Iraqi insurgents beheading American contractors. 'These forms of savagery,' according to Susie Linfield, 'are neither mere images nor mere actions, but are *designed* to be both.'[12] Images are a core process of contemporary warfare, alongside intelligence, logistics and other strategic operations.

Moving images became a part of war during World War I, when Pathé and Gaumont produced sixty documentaries and a series of ninety-three films called the *War Annals*.[13] When we see these very early newsreels, which were intended in their time to be factual accounts of war, we can clearly see their artificiality. Some of the shots are simply impossible, and we understand quite clearly that many of the sequences are set up for dramatic effect. However, according to Pierre Sorlin, no critical responses to these movies in their day actually addressed the blatant artificiality of these scenes.[14] This suggests something important about the eagerness of their

wartime audience to suspend their disbelief in order to accept them as factual and fulfil certain emotional objectives; this willingness to negotiate and reframe certain images of war so that they may meet certain demands we make upon them is the focus of this chapter. I pick up a thread from Chapter One, and explore the idea that rather than images simply seducing and manipulating us in our unfaltering belief in their factuality, we, the audience that consumes popular representations of war, also make collective emotional demands upon those images. In times of war and its high emotional stakes, we prevail upon images for reassurance, to manifest particular values that resonate with familiar cultural mythologies – the stories a culture tells itself about itself, in order to constitute itself. This chapter looks at two events in the war in Iraq, or rather, the *representation* of those events in American popular culture at the time: one is the dramatic 'rescue' from Iraq of American Private First Class Jessica Lynch in April 2003; the other concerns the images that emerged a year later from Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. In both cases, and in very different ways, these representations did not initially cohere, yet were 'salvaged' from rejection, to varying degrees. The Jessica Lynch story collapsed swiftly under competing narratives and emotional demands; however, its popular culture re-rendering attempted more or less successfully to reconstruct and rehabilitate the story. When confronted by photographs that appeared to depict American servicemen and women inflicting cruelty upon prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the audience was asked to look again, this time with a different frame. Indeed, both of these episodes have a particular resonance with *Zero Dark Thirty*, with shared gender mythologies and the reframing of torture, which I shall return to later.

Rehabilitation

On 23 March 2003, four days after the coalition invasion of Iraq, Michael Moore took to the stage at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood to collect the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. To a mixture of jeers and applause, he declared, "We live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious President. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons."[15] On the very same day, near the town of Nasiriyah in Iraq, the US Army's 507th Maintenance Company was ambushed. Nineteen-year-old PFC Jessica Lynch was pulled unconscious from her vehicle by Iraqi forces and taken to Saddam Hospital in Nasiriyah. She was retrieved from the hospital by US Special Forces on 1 April 2003.

As Douglas Kellner notes, 'The dramatic story of "Saving Private Lynch" was one of the more spectacular human-interest stories of the war that revealed the constructed and spectacle nature of the event and the ways that the Pentagon constructed mythologies to be replicated by the television networks.'[16] According to Lieutenant Colonel John Robinson, chief of plans in United States Central Command's public affairs division, they decided to video record the 'rescue' because they "wanted to tell a good story."[17] Curiously, Central Command didn't run with the story immediately at its press conference in Doha. Instead, CNN's Tom Mintier appears to have been set up to ask what in Australian politics is called a 'Dorothy Dixer' (a self-orchestrated question) during the closing questions of their press conference on 3 April. Mintier asked Brigadier General Vincent Brooks about 'the rescue of Jessica Lynch' and the video. Conveniently, an edited video tape of rescue footage was cued ready to roll and Brooks read rather stiltedly from a pre-prepared account of the rescue over the grainy green night-vision images. Brooks added, "Some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know, that they'll never leave a fallen comrade […]."[18]

That same day, the *Washington Post* ran a dramatic account of how, during her capture, the fearless Private Lynch 'was fighting to the death', that even after sustaining a number of gunshot wounds she continued to fire on Iraqi soldiers until she ran out of ammunition.[19] Over the following days more of the rescue footage was 'leaked'. At one point in the footage, Lynch is found by her fellow American soldiers lying in her hospital bed. Something about the diminutive, startled and almost infantile Lynch, panicking at the sounds of gunfire nearby, did not quite fit the *Washington Post's* Little Girl Rambo story. There then followed the victim narrative, particularly one based on sexual subjugation. Rick Bragg's biography claims that Lynch's hospital records 'show that she was a victim of anal sexual assault'; Bragg speculates, somewhat gratuitously, 'The records do not tell whether her captors assaulted her almost lifeless, broken body after she was lifted from the wreckage, or if they assaulted her and then broke her bones into splinters until she was almost dead.'[20] However, no evidence of rape exists in Lynch's own accounts or those of several doctors at the hospital who examined her on arrival as well as operated on her.[21] Either way, the suggestion of Lynch's rape performs a certain mythological function by reinvigorating a centuries-old orientalist myth of the white female sex slave: 'Innocence deceived, youthful virginity despoiled, the motifs of disease and death, the depraved black/Jewish/foreign trafficker, point in the direction of a new telling of an old myth [...] the retelling of the myth of "white slavery".'[22] Jo Doezema argues that this retelling emerges when societies experience 'boundary crises' caused by mass migration and globalisation,[23] or, in this case, war.

US Army (USA) Private First Class (PFC) Jessica D. Lynch, 507th Ordnance Maintenance Company, is returned to US Military custody following a rescue mission by US Special Forces, from a hospital in Nassiriya, Iraq, during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

The intention behind the Pentagon's original narrative was actually less concerned with Lynch and more focused on the soldiers who rescued her and, as Brigadier General Brooks had said, the "creed that they know, that they'll never leave a fallen comrade."[24] As Roger Stahl notes, 'The official Pentagon account of Lynch's rescue appeared to borrow its storyline directly from Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*,'[25] and to some extent Lynch's role was just 'to be rescued' and had not been considered much beyond that. As a consequence, the Pentagon and the various news media channels generated very different narratives that fitted different myths, which were simply not congruous with one another. Taking from Roland Barthes, Rikke Schubart argues that myths must fit certain traditional forms for them to find social and cultural resonance, regardless of whether or not such myths are factually convincing. Yet despite the intentions of the narrators (the media, the Pentagon), the myths surrounding Jessica Lynch simply did not gel:

> If an audience is to find a myth meaningful they need not know whether it is factually true. They do, however, need to recognise its form and content as true to myth itself. Narrative agents in political communication cannot freely construct new myths out of events. If such new myths do not resonate with audiences, they do not create faith, and then – factually true or not – they will be rejected.[26]

Judith Butler's idea of 'the frame' is a similar concept to Barthes' idea of mythologies, and one that arises specifically in her consideration of images of war

since 9/11.[27] For Butler, the frame is not merely that which is literally pictured within the frame of the still or moving images that emerge from war; but rather that which defines and determines what can actually be recognised, and therefore what is understood, communicated, considered and acted upon. Schubart argues that the Jessica Lynch story failed to generate a convincing mythology because there was no agreement on which myth this was to be: was it a female war hero myth? Was it a white female captivity myth? These two contradict each other in too many ways to easily coexist.[28] None of the prescribed narratives convincingly fitted the frame and the mythologising of the Jessica Lynch 'rescue' failed. [29]

Indeed, while the hero and victim narratives were coming undone, another emerged: the hoax narrative. Once Nasiriyah was brought fully under US control, more cynically inclined journalists were free to investigate the story. On 7 May 2003, American ABC's David Wright visited the hospital from which Lynch had been dramatically retrieved and interviewed Dr. Rajd Eledary, who was due to set Lynch's leg the next morning. Eledary claims that the US soldiers needlessly held a gun to his head and terrorised hospital staff and patients.[30] By mid-May it was clear that the 'rescue' had been carefully stage-managed; as John Kampfner in the *Guardian* said at the time, '[Lynch's] rescue will go down as one of the most stunning pieces of news management yet conceived. It provides a remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon's media managers, and has produced a template from which America hopes to present its future wars.'[31] According to one of the doctors at the hospital, "It was a Hollywood film. They cried 'Go, go, go,' with guns and blanks and the sound of explosions. They made a show – an action movie like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan, with jumping and shouting, breaking down the doors."[32] Far from being the "location of danger" that Brigadier General Brooks had described,[33] Iraqi troops had actually left two days earlier.[34] Butler argues, 'The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognise, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.'[35] The Jessica Lynch story, which seemed to possess such rich potential only a week earlier, failed.

However, seven months after the event, American television network NBC aired its telemovie *Saving Jessica Lynch* (2003). Its now-dramatised narrative clearly sought to actively rehabilitate the Jessica Lynch story, so that it would properly fit the frame, so it would become something recognisable and acceptable to its audience. *Saving Jessica Lynch* was produced in cooperation with the Pentagon and broadcast in the

United States on 9 November 2003 without commercial breaks. The reimagined Lynch (played by Laura Regan) was no longer 'fighting to the death' during her capture, allowing her now to be a more satisfactory female hero for its audience: vulnerable yet stoic and courageous, mentally tough but acceptably passive. Other aspects of a more acceptable mythology were also created through the narrative invention of a colonel of Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen (played by Navid Negahban). Dressed completely in black, the swarthy turbaned Fedayeen colonel is an archetype of nineteenth-century European orientalism. His menacing presence shadows Lynch throughout the movie, attacking Lynch's convoy, later directing surgeons at Saddam Hospital to amputate her broken leg, which is otherwise perfectly healthy, and finally fleeing in cowardice at the approaching US helicopters during Lynch's rescue. In one hospital scene, he interrupts a female Muslim nurse administering care to Lynch and, accompanied by his own menacing Arabian incidental music, paces predatorily around Lynch's bed. Although he does nothing more than this, the scene restates the uncertainty surrounding whether or not Lynch was sexually assaulted while she was unconscious, but does so without confronting prime-time audiences with 'anal sexual assault'.[36] Lynch stares down the colonel, striking a comfortable narrative compromise that preserves both her 'honour' and the orientalist white sex-slave myth.

This dramatic reinscription of the Jessica Lynch myth struck the right note with its American audience; as Stahl notes, it was 'the highest-rated venture of its kind for NBC in twelve years.'[37] The 'real' story was inconsequential; to paraphrase Jean Baudrillard, it no longer preceded its simulacrum, nor survived it.[38] While the story of Jessica Lynch that played out through the news media in April 2003 failed to convince its audience, the telemovie in November of that year made good on the Pentagon's original intentions by satisfying the cinematic mythology of which Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* is the model.[39] Perhaps the story of the real 'damsel in (staged) distress'[40] appeared to lose its staginess once the audience was willing to suspend its disbelief in exchange for an emotional pay-off. Certainly NBC's *Saving Jessica Lynch* saved the failed myth, rehabilitating it as a telemovie experience. This reinscription excised the messy sexualised side-narrative, the conflicting hero/victim myths, the cynical counter-narratives about Central Command's public affairs division and the findings of investigative journalists and indeed, the wholesale dismissal of the myths as they were originally presented. Instead, *Saving Jessica Lynch* reorganised the Jessica Lynch story to fit the frame through what Roger Stahl calls the 'new patriot narrative' that emerged in the 1990s, which 'refigures the purpose of war as the rescue of one's own soldiers.'[41] Stahl argues that anti-war narratives

became popular in cinema in the post-Vietnam era, with movies like *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986). The more pro-war response into the 1980s reframed war as a moral response to the crisis of an individual or small group, which we see in movies such as the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* series. In the late 1990s, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) marks a point of convergence between these two strands in popular American cinema, reconciling the paradox of the immoral brutality of war with its moral necessity.[42] In reworking the story in cinematic form to fit a cinematic trope, *Saving Jessica Lynch* thus satisfied the emotional demands of its audience in a way that the story itself simply could not.

Torture

On 17 May 2011, just over two weeks after bin Laden's death, I sat in the front row of the New York studio audience of the *Late Show with David Letterman* and watched the comedian Martin Short sing a parody of Elton John's *Candle in the Wind* about bin Laden's death:

> It seems to me you lived your life like a bastard in the sand,
> never knowing when the US Navy Seals would land,
> caught you by surprise inside your secret base,
> could have shot you anywhere,
> why not in the face.[43]

The audience's response was rapturous. For many in that audience, bin Laden's death enacted a personal vengeance, for the loss of friends and family, but more broadly for the loss of homeliness, of a sense of security in the streets of a city that had only recently recovered from a two-decade crime wave. And sitting among that live audience, I completely understood the palpable emotion. The violent mental image of Short's lyrics immediately evoked the fake image of the 'dead' Osama bin Laden, which despite its obvious bogusness was still reverberating powerfully within popular consciousness. However, that collective emotional demand was only partially met until *Zero Dark Thirty*. *Zero Dark Thirty* took a year longer than *Saving Jessica Lynch* to rework, rehabilitate and remythologise the event it depicts into a cinematic frame. However, it effectively sought to salvage much more than the 'missing' image of bin Laden dead. Coming a year after the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and amidst the drawdown in Afghanistan, *Zero Dark Thirty* functions as a popular culture coda to the War on Terror, a parting shot in what Linfield calls the War on Terror's

'diabolical *pas de deux* of violent images'.[44] One of the key narratives of the War on Terror the movie seeks to reframe is that of torture.

A core strand of the narrative of *Zero Dark Thirty* is the development of the movie's protagonist, Maya. A female CIA analyst was instrumental in locating bin Laden; but, of course, Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* is a fictional character. Probably unlike the 'real' Maya, she seems to owe much of her character to the female protagonist of the television series *Homeland* (2011), Carrie, played by actor Claire Danes:[45] obsessive, focused, slightly psychologically unhinged, a strong female character in a male-dominated world of international espionage. The first thirty minutes of *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts the torture of a detainee, including sleep depravation, starvation, beating, locking into a confined space and waterboarding. At the beginning of the torture at an unknown 'black site', Maya is an anonymous observer in a balaclava. During a break her male colleague taunts her with, "Just off the plane from Washington?" He reassures her: "It's not always this intense." She replies, plainly, "I'm fine," then insists on going back into the torture room rather than getting a coffee, as her male counterpart suggests. She then turns down offers both to soften the impact by watching through a monitor and to lessen the confrontation by wearing a balaclava. They re-enter the torture room, where Maya's male colleague escalates the torture into waterboarding, asking Maya to "grab a bucket." She seems reluctant at first, but compliant. While the covered face of the detainee chokes and the male colleague shouts, "Where was the last time you saw bin Laden?", Maya squats and watches. In the next torture scene, the same detainee is questioned by Maya's male colleague about Richard Reid, the 'Shoe Bomber', who attempted to bring down an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami in December 2001. He reminds the detainee that, "When you lie to me, I hurt you." To humiliate the detainee, the colleague leaves him tied up by the wrists, naked from the waist down, in front of Maya, while he leaves the room. The detainee begs Maya, "Please, help me." Of course, the audience is set up to expect a compassionate 'feminine' response; instead, Maya says, "You can help yourself by being truthful," and walks away.

Matching her male colleague's acceptance of torture, Maya demonstrates her value as his equal. Indeed, Bigelow, the only female director to win an Academy Award, for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), was characterised as a feminist following the release of *Zero Dark Thirty*,[46] and the movie as 'a feminist epic' based on its strong female lead.[47] Film critic Inkoo Kang says, 'The feminism in [*Zero Dark Thirty*] follows the "anything a man can do, I can do better" school of thought.'[48] Marouf Hasian Jr's

considered analysis of the gender politics of *Zero Dark Thirty* suggests that, although the narrative 'may seem to highlight the social agency of CIA women, it is in fact a misogynistic fragment which puts on display the dehumanization and barbarity that takes place when women have to act in hypermasculine ways in order to achieve their goals.'[49] In other words, it deploys a superficially feminist narrative in the service of seeking to neutralise the barbarity of torture and 'comes at the cost of hiding myriad political, economic, and social inequities [sic].'[50] It is not only the acceptance of torture that is troubling to some, but also the impression created by the narrative arc of a direct causal link between the information gained through torture and the ultimate locating of bin Laden's secret base.[51] On this count, Naomi Wolf addresses Bigelow in an open letter in the *Guardian*, placing *Zero Dark Thirty* in the contemporary context of the 'propaganda amendment' to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013,[52] and likens the movie to the work of Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker best known for creating Nazi propaganda movies, such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which glorified the rapid militarisation of Germany following the rise of Adolf Hitler.[53] Slavoj Žižek disagrees: 'The film is not cheap right-wing propaganda: the psychological complexity is depicted so that liberals can enjoy the film without feeling guilty [for the torture].'[54] Žižek argues that *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts torture as neutral, and in doing so 'is already a kind of endorsement.'[55] So the liberal narrative of the strong female role model is tied inextricably to the acceptance of torture as part of the package. Paradoxically, Maya's equality is a consequence of, and demonstrated by, her tacit and neutral acquiescence.

Nine years earlier, in NBC's *Saving Jessica Lynch*, torture was treated quite differently, as an obscenity, practiced by the enemy. During the rescue scene, images from a soldier's helmet-mounted camera catch a glimpse of a room within which appears to be a dissection table. One of the American military observers watching the live video at the base asks, "What the hell is that?" The answer is, "That's a torture room, fellas." The camera pans the room, allowing the audience to comprehend the abject inhumanity this represents. The contrast suggests something of the shift in the political discourses in America surrounding torture, which took place over the course of the administration of US President George W. Bush.

Festive Cruelty

At the same time as the fictionalised Iraqi torture room was shocking audiences of *Saving Jessica Lynch*, Major General Antonio M. Taguba was authoring his report,

later leaked to Seymour M. Hersh at the *New Yorker*, about 'sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses' by United States soldiers guarding Abu Ghraib.[56] It was not until the following year, on 28 April 2004, that images of these abuses entered the popular consciousness, when American current affairs program *60 Minutes*, on the CBS television network, broadcast the first of what we now know as the 'Abu Ghraib photographs'.

Many of these first-released Abu Ghraib photographs showed several American soldiers in various poses – pointing, giving thumbs-up, faces held in mocking 'cheesy' grins – next to images of Iraqi prisoners, usually stripped naked, piled on top of each other, with empty sand bags placed over their heads. Amongst the most infamous and now iconic of these photographs is 'The Hooded Man', a prisoner wearing a sand bag 'hood' and a sheet, standing on a box with electrical wires attached to his hands; Private Lynndie England holding a leash wrapped around the neck of a naked Iraqi on the floor of the prison corridor; the same soldier with a cigarette dangling from her mouth pointing at a naked male Iraqi prisoner who has been posed masturbating. As Bernard Haykel explained to Hersh, these situations are deliberately set up to humiliate the prisoners: "Being put on top of each other and forced to be naked in front of each other – it's all a form of torture."[57] Some of the more disturbing pictures show a room awash with blood and photographs of the battered and dead bodies of inmates.

NBC's *Saving Jessica Lynch* fits what Butler calls 'the frame'; it's something that its audience recognises, identifies with, understands and accepts. The Abu Ghraib photographs, on the other hand, did not fit the frame. What could be seen fitted the iconography of Christian images of suffering, particularly. These photographs showed images of abuses that were already known to be happening; but they also visually conceived them, gave them a recognisable form in the shape of the Christ-like pose of The Hooded Man. The Abu Ghraib photographs drew on an emotive, affecting and compelling visual language that resonates with centuries of Christian images of suffering. As such, these photographs made a potent incursion into the frame that was largely unwelcome to the Bush administration. What was this image of American servicemen and woman abroad? This was a very different creed from the noble soldier that Brigadier General Brooks had spoken about during his press conference on the rescue of PFC Lynch a year earlier.[58]

Taken together, the Abu Ghraib photographs suggested something far more disturbing than a few 'bad apples' or of a frat party trick taken the wrong way – they

formed part of a much larger culture of visualising cruelty in which the camera was a central instrument within a system of torture as well as a system of the exchange, distribution and consumption of these images amongst military personnel. As Butler observes, 'It took some time before the question was raised as to who actually took the photos... did they take them in order to expose the abuse, or to gloat in the spirit of US triumphalism? Was the taking of the photo a way of participating in the event, and if so, what way?'[59] The presence of the camera was integral to the torture depicted. In the years following, many more hundreds of images surfaced of this 'festive cruelty', as Butler calls it,[60] suggesting that these abuses were perhaps the rule rather than the exception. Noel Whitty, considering the extent of detainee abuse revealed by photographs that emerged from Iraq, quotes Janina Struk's analysis of photographs of the Holocaust: 'This soldier photography was always part of a dehumanisation process: the photo was "an integral part of the humiliation process; in a sense it completed the violation".'[61]

Butler notes that the Bush administration 'did not dispute that the photographs were real... The photos are not only shown, but named; the way that they are shown, the way they are framed, and the words used to describe what is shown, work together to produce an interpretive matrix for what is seen.'[62] As Žižek says about the depiction of torture in Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, 'Brutal violence practised by the state is made publicly acceptable when language is changed.'[63] The interpretation of the Abu Ghraib photographs was thus a two-stage re-framing: a legalistic re-framing of the prisoners in the photographs (which I will return to shortly), and a cognitive re-framing of what was 'seen' within the initial 'interpretive matrix' of the *60 Minutes* story. This re-framing attempted to alter the affective potency of these images. Indeed, as Butler suggests, the 'words used' were vitally significant to the interpretation of what is seen in these photographs; which is likewise the cynical core argument of Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*.[64] Any 'interpretive matrix' is always contingent, always upon shaky ground, and similarly 'what is seen'. From the moment the Abu Ghraib photographs were captured they became vessels to be loaded with ideological content. As with all images of war, their ideological content was never predetermined – we cannot necessarily predict the ways in which any interpretive matrix will act upon an image.

Certainly, Butler's writings on Abu Ghraib can only speak of 'cruelty' and 'violation' because of the certain ideological ground Butler occupies – those are *her* 'words used', which frame the Abu Ghraib images in a particular way. However, unlike Woolf, Butler is acutely wary of falling into a simple universalistic moralism. In *Frames of War*

she is clear to apply the measure of international law.[65] The First, Second and Third Geneva Conventions were adopted in 1864, 1906 and 1929, respectively, and their modern iteration and Fourth Convention, adopted in 1949, was forged amongst the humanistic and universalistic optimism that followed the defeat of European fascism in the Second World War. In many respects, these international laws sit uneasily within the pluralism of the post-war, postcolonial and postmodern world, and the universalistic values manifested in international law are only universal insofar as they are universally recognised. With a simplistic reading of Butler's argument, then, it could be argued that she applies a curiously universalistic measure to the Bush administration, particularly since she earned her name as a leading thinker of post-structuralist feminism, opposed to a stable humanistic world view. Perhaps for Butler, appealing to the humanism of international law is a strategy for pointing out its vulnerability in a relativistic world, reminding us its values are universal only as long as they are universally subscribed. Both Butler and Sontag agree that interpretation is purely ideologically determined. Sontag says: 'No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain,'[66] while Butler says: 'The question of whether governmental officials called what is depicted in the photos "abuse" or "torture" suggests that the relation to international law is already at work; abuse can be addressed by disciplinary proceedings within the military, but torture is a war crime'.[67]

Enhanced Coercive Interrogation Technique

After 9/11, it could be argued that the Bush administration effectively rewrote the terms of the Geneva Conventions for the United States, to sideline the *spirit* of the law by applying such narrow interpretations of the *letter* as to make it ineffectual. Douglas Kellner attributes this to what he sees as Bush's inherent anti-intellectualism: 'Bush's rhetoric, like that of fascism, deploys a mistrust and hatred of language, reducing it to manipulative speechifying, speaking in codes, repeating the same phrases over and over.'[68] While this is arguable at the level of public rhetoric, in actuality the Bush administration effectively exercised its military goals through the manipulation of language. Very early in the War on Terror, the Bush administration created a whole new category of combatants that it insisted were not protected by international law. Al Qaeda and Taliban forces were, by the Administration's assessment, not prisoners of war but unlawful 'enemy combatants', paradoxically waiving their inalienable human rights.[69] The Deputy Assistant Attorney General from 2001 to 2003, John Yoo, authored a memo in 2002 redefining

torture so that only the most severe pain, equalling organ failure or death, could be prohibited. The President appeared to be authorising humiliation and torture interrogation practices and the 'rendition' of people to third-party countries for the purposes of torture.[70] At a talk at University of California Berkeley in 2008, Taguba, who had written the report in late 2003 on the abuses taking place in Abu Ghraib, said that Yoo's memo "paved the way for the ambiguity of rules of war,"[71] effectively creating new rules. This legitimized indefinite internment at Guantánamo Bay beyond any protection from international law, which an anonymous CIA analyst states were 'war crimes'.[72] The Guantánamo protocols were thus transferred to Abu Ghraib, regardless of the different context.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that for the Bush administration, its enemies in this war 'do not count as human; they are not subjects protected by international law. They are not subjects in any legal or normative sense.'[73] In *Frames of War*, the follow-up to *Precarious Life*, she goes the logical step further to argue that this selectivity extends out to the assumption that some lives are determined as grievable and others are not: 'Ungrievable lives are those that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone… When they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed.'[74] When John Walker Lindh, a twenty-year-old American found fighting on the side of the Taliban, was captured in December 2001, he was stripped naked, blindfolded and strapped to a stretcher while photographs were taken of him. For the Bush administration's new rules of war it was inconsequential that this treatment of Lindh breached both the *Third Geneva Convention in relation to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, Article 13, and the *Fourth Geneva Convention in relation to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, Article 27, which protect prisoners of war against 'insults and public curiosity'. Justice Department documents show that the commanding officer at the base where Lindh was held had been authorised to 'take the gloves off' in their interrogation of him.[75]

The Bush administration created a new expedient and relativistic ethical paradigm, in which the clearest language of international law becomes obfuscated by legalistic sleights of mouth such as those by Donald Rumsfeld, United States Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2006, and other Bush aides. Ron Suskind of the *New York Times* recalls an encounter with a 'senior adviser to Bush', later widely believed to have been Karl Rove:[76]

> He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend – but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." [77]

This imperialised version of relativism effectively created a new ethical reality, which shaped the culture and the conduct of the War on Terror under the Bush administration. In a *New York Times Magazine* article, Susan Sontag says the Abu Ghraib photographs illustrate the 'culture of shamelessness' of the Bush administration.[78] 'Civilisation,' Susie Linfield observes, assumes 'that people will be ashamed, or at least fear the consequences, of the hurtful acts they commit,' since 'it is hard to trust a world in which my pain, or yours, is the pride and joy of another.'[79] But these were precisely the conditions of the War on Terror; not because 'civilisation' was in decay, but because all of the parties to that war, East and West, deemed it necessary to create new sets of values that foreclose upon shame. Ethan McCord, a former member of Bravo Company 2-16, described the response of his commanding officers to his shamed reaction to having been involved in an attack in Iraq that resulted in the deaths of civilians and two Reuters journalists, as well as grievous injuries to two children: "I decided I needed to go see a mental health counsellor. I went to a SSG (staff sergeant) who was in my line, asked to speak with him. When I told him my feelings and how I was unable to deal properly with what I had just witnessed his response was, 'You need to suck that shit up, quit being a pussy, and get the sand out of your vagina.'"[80] The 'words used' made international law irrelevant and shame (and thus, compassion) near impossible. Abstract and politically expedient relativism, applied to the real world of the battlefield, demanded that US soldiers 'suck that shit up' while their adversaries celebrated the brutality of beheading civilian contractors as honourable and glorious deeds, to be recorded and distributed on the internet. What might have been a conflict conducted within the rules learned amid the horrors of past wars, descended into the tyranny of shamelessness. As Stanley Milgram's infamous experiment demonstrates, shame needs an ethical context that supports it. Where there is no loss, nothing grievable, no humanity to destroy, there is no shame.

For a period following April 2004, much debate focused on the deeper causes of the Abu Ghraib photographs and explanations tend to fall one of two ways: the first was the moral panic story, that a 'cultural rot' and 'culture of permissiveness' permeate popular American culture, corrupted by a saturation of images of violence and pornography;[81] the second was the political corruption story, that the Bush administration's disregard for the spirit of the Geneva Conventions perpetrated a culture of dehumanisation of 'the enemy'. Perhaps a more accurate explanation is not based on atrophy and decay but rather on generation and creativity. The images from the War on Terror, as well as those from American popular culture, were actively part of a larger system of cultural production that synergistically creates emotional demands then reproduces myths to meet them. Despite their differences, *Saving Jessica Lynch* and the Abu Ghraib photographs belonged to a larger system that circulates these images and values across culture, which, as mentioned in the introduction to this book, James Der Derian calls the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network,[82] abbreviated to the 'MIME-NET'.[83] Michelle Brown talks about the root of the Abu Ghraib photographs arising from America's 'prison-industrial complex', which America actively cultivates at home and exports abroad.[84] These structural and systemic understandings of the functioning of images in war, suggested by Der Derian, Brown and others, are not based on the idea of a 'rot', of degeneration, dissolution or entropy, of atrophying cultural morality or political corruption; rather, they are based on the idea that this vast increasingly militarised cultural and commercial system actively produces images, culture and values for the ultimate purpose of perpetuating and expanding itself.

Images of war and American political and popular culture were actively part of a larger system of cultural production that characterised the War on Terror. Likewise, images of war bleed back and forth across culture. The image paradigm of the War on Terror was the same as that in which we lived many thousands of miles away from the frontlines. Richard Grusin argues that one reason why the Abu Ghraib photographs were so shocking to the American public was not merely their content but also the use of everyday domestic digital photography itself: 'media practices similar, if not identical, to those practices widespread among students, tourists, parents, pet-owners, photo-bloggers, and in the military itself.'[85] In other words, the ordinariness of the media breaks down a perceived barrier between the monstrous and the mundane, between the culture of the war zone and the culture of home. The Abu Ghraib photographs were thus both part cause and part manifestation of the conditions in which these distinctions broke down.

The Jessica Lynch and Abu Ghraib episodes in the War on Terror suggest the frame acted not only to include and exclude certain images of war, but to *create* culture. Both offer interesting and quite different instances of the functioning of the frames of war: the Jessica Lynch myth was created to fit the frame, but failed, until it was rehabilitated into the 'correct' frame retrospectively by its dramatisation as an American telemovie. The frame practically willed the 'right' images into existence. The Abu Ghraib photographs, on the other hand, intruded into the frame without permission. New legal and semantic terms were created in the hope of making these unwelcome incursions disappear through a reframing of the actions they show. Arguably, this reframing of the Abu Ghraib photographs continued to fail for many years, and images with a particular iconographic power, such as that of The Hooded Man, continued to be reproduced and re-presented many times over, in mass culture and contemporary art. However, Maya's acceptance of torture for the sake of the Homeland in *Zero Dark Thirty* – an Oscar-winning mainstream Hollywood movie, touted as a work of liberal feminism – could be simply understood as the filmmaker holding up a mirror to the political discourses on torture that dominated American politics during the War on Terror; or it could provide the reframing that ultimately rehabilitates the cruelty of the Abu Ghraib photographs as acceptable and neutral. History tells us that, after the fog of war, when the smoke and dust clears, the images that endure are those that most clearly fit the dominant frame: Joe Rosenthal's iconic photograph of *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* represents America's victory in the War in the Pacific in 1945, even though it's common knowledge that the actual flag-raising occurred a day earlier and was captured in a far less theatrical image by Louis R. Lowery. The endurance of Rosenthal's photograph of Iwo Jima suggests the power of the frames through which we understand war to reinscribe meaning to images. It is too early to know which will win out – shame or acceptance.

Louis R Lowery, A U.S. Marine from the 5th Division of the 28th Regiment stands guard atop Mt. Suribachi at Iwo Jima, 1945

Joe Rosenthal, U.S. Marines of the 28th Regiment of the Fifth Division raise the American flag atop Mt. Suribachi at Iwo Jima, 1945

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