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*Re-thinking Abu Ghraib:*

*A Discussion on the Abu Ghraib Images beyond the Iconic  
Reading*

A Master's Thesis for the Degree "Master of Arts (Two  
Years) in Visual Culture"

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***Abstract***

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The research objective for this thesis are two problematic yet interweaving occurrences observed in earlier research on the Abu Ghraib scandal (2004) and its image material. Firstly in terms of methodology, a restricted amount of images in which three single images, “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” are overrepresented and frequently regarded as descriptive for the scandal as such. Secondly in terms of theory and interpretation, a predominating iconic reading which hypothetically provided the three images with an iconic surface in terms of a “public face”, characterised by an object status; both when it comes to the images themselves, and the bodies depicted.

By means of Gillian Rose’s methodology of “three sites at which an image’s meaning is made”, and the abject theory presented by Julia Kristeva, the thesis seeks to penetrate the established “public face” in order to emphasise what may be obstructed by the surface layer, as well as to advocate a view on the depicted bodies as subjects rather than objects. A prime interest is the human body which is further treated in two separate aspects of “human” and “body”. A second interest is the digital qualities and context in which the Abu Ghraib images have received a perpetual life, are analysed and observed.

In conclusion, what is “hidden” or somewhat obstructed by the “public face” are several aspects of the abject, threatening the subject due to its closeness and notions of the real. The initial objective of reading the depicted bodies as subjects was so revised into an abject reading. A perspective of we/them is central in the encountering and reading of the Abu Ghraib images as it is found both in the iconic reading and the abject reading. Also, the digital qualities of the images and the digital context of the screen exert influence on the abject and the icon. The relationship between the abject and the icon presented could be regarded as one possible explanation of the dominant position of the iconic reading of the Abu Ghraib images.

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## Introduction

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2004, an American military source today known as Spc. Joseph Darby handed over an unknown number of images to the American Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID)<sup>1</sup>. They were digital images originally taken at some point during the previous three months inside the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The images showed members of the American army directly abusing and torturing Iraqi detainees, or lewdly documenting the set act or result of it. Three and a half months later, in late April 2004, an approximate number of 23 images were revealed to the general public through various American news media and dispersed worldwide on the internet<sup>2</sup>. The approximation of 23 images is based on a compiled record made and published online at some point in May 2004 (there was some data inconsistency) by the British newspaper site The Guardian.co.uk<sup>3</sup>. The Guardian record shows 23 images with attached information about what date each image had been published and in what context. Further research of mine has shown that due to their given date of publishing these particular 23 images are the most well-known and representative images of the entire Abu Ghraib scandal as one knows it today. The scandal understandably gave rise to countless strong reactions and it was heatedly debated worldwide; academically, politically as well as more generally. Today the debate has been rather toned down but not so much within academic as in political circles.

In 2006 a second tranche of images from the Abu Ghraib prison were made public, this time by the American website Salon.com<sup>4</sup>. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2006, Salon published 279 digital images and 19 videos accompanied by a ten chapter long text titled *The Abu Ghraib Files*, written by two Salon staff members, Mark Benjamin and Michael Scherer. The record was once again obtained through a military source who had spent time at Abu Ghraib and was familiar with the army probe<sup>5</sup>. Closer examination shows that the Salon record includes at least 22 of the 23 images originally found in The Guardian record.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Benjamin, Michael Scherer, *The Abu Ghraib Files* at: Salon.com  
<[http://www.salon.com/2006/03/14/introduction\\_2/singleton/](http://www.salon.com/2006/03/14/introduction_2/singleton/)>published: 14 March 2006, retrieved: 08 Feb 2012, pg."introduction"

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>The Guardian.co.uk, "Torture Scandal; The Images that Shamed America":  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html>>published: data inconsistency, retrieved: 08 Feb 2012

<sup>4</sup>Mark Benjamin, Michael Scherer, *Op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

When going through written as well as other published material related to the Abu Ghraib scandal today there are two problematic yet interwoven occurrences to be observed; one in terms of methodology and another one in terms of theory and interpretation. In academic research of relevance as well as in more general references three single images represented in The Guardian record appear to be dominating as they are most frequently reproduced or most frequently referred to. Yet, it is apparent that The Guardian record does not seem to be a known source of reference in their case. The images in question are “Hooded Man” (fig.1), “Man on Leash” (fig.3) and “Piled Bodies” (fig.4)<sup>6</sup>. What does not seem to be known or is ignored to a certain extent is the actual large number of images that exist and are available, especially post 2006. During this examination I have only come across two sources showing an awareness of the Salon record, and that is Mark Benjamin and Michael Scherer themselves, as well as Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*<sup>7</sup>. The limitation of the visual material is clearly a problem as it obscures any possible outcomes in terms of generalisation and objectification, both of the images themselves and what is depicted.

That said, one could go on to the second problematic occurrence to be observed in which theory and interpretation is of central concern. Like an extension of the overrepresentation of the three single images “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies”, there is a predominant iconic reading of these three particular images as well as the Abu Ghraib scandal itself and the entire “war on terror”. Such approach is principally represented by WJT Mitchell and his text *Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-04* and writings by Susan Sontag<sup>8</sup>. Also Nicholas Mirzoeff to some extent in his book *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*<sup>9</sup>. It would not be fair to claim that there is no other or no alternative reading available on the Abu Ghraib images or visual material in relation to the Iraq war or “war on terror” as there is, but it is a much underrepresented number. For instance, in April 2006 *Journal of Visual Culture* published a thematic issue on the Iraq war, and unlike many other sources on the Iraq war and Abu Ghraib, this issue contains

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<sup>6</sup>The given names are not formally set as constructed in relation to this thesis.

<sup>7</sup>Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Verso Publishing, London: 2010

<sup>8</sup>WJT Mitchell, “Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-04” in Diarmuid Castello, Dominic Willson (eds.) *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca New York: 2008

<sup>9</sup>Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, Routledge, New York: 2005

articles that put strong emphasis on discussions of social aspects and outcomes rather than iconic matters, yet an iconic approach is not excluded in the issue as a whole<sup>10</sup>.

A hypothesis which is at the basis of this thesis is that the Abu Ghraib images in general and the three single images “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” in particular have through a well-established and dominating iconic reading been provided with an iconic surface which can be equated to a “public face”. The term “public face” does not appear in other sources as it is coined here in order to signify the iconic reading. The iconic reading is characterised by an object reading of the images themselves as well as what is being depicted. As its prime referents are already established pictorial categories rather than reality, the outcome is often regarded as a generalised reading of images as objects, and the depicted human bodies approached as objects rather than subjects. For instance, as Gerry Beegan points out in his article *Imperial Vagueness and the Image in the Iraq War* interpretations of images of the war tend to ignore the specifics of a particular individual in a particular situation<sup>11</sup>. Due to its quality of having a surface and objective status the “public face” also tends to exclude what might exist underneath as well as what is assumed to be most essential for the surfaced layer.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to penetrate the “public face” of the three images of interest - “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” - to strive for a deeper examination and understanding of the three images and what is being depicted and to advocate viewing the depicted bodies more as subjects than as objects, and the images as images with reality as their prime referent rather than other images. The aim is not to deny the iconic reading but to question it and add to it outside its own limitations. Unlike earlier research, the Salon record will here be taken into account alongside The Guardian record. Yet the video material in the Salon record will be excluded as the video material posits formal qualities other than the still images and would so require further considerations. The depicted human body is of prime interest and can further on be separated and treated as two different aspects in terms of “human” and “body”. A second matter of interest is the digital qualities as well as the digital context in which the Abu Ghraib images have received

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<sup>10</sup> *Journal of Visual Culture*, ELIN@Lund, Sage Journals, London: April 2006 vol.5 no.1

<sup>11</sup> Gerry Beegan, “Imperial Vagueness and the Image in the Iraq War” in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2006 5:101, retrieved: 11 Feb 2011 ELIN@Lund, pg.102

a perpetual life, are examined and observed. This is not to be neglected as the context is one of three necessary components in the proper creation of an image's meaning.

The penetration of the public face will take place by means of a number of significant steps and each chapter is meant to represent one step. Chapter one, "Three Sites of Meaning", presents a closer view and selection of the visual empirical material of interest and establishes a pervading method based on Gillian Rose's three sites at which the meaning of an image is made - site of production, site of the image itself and site of audiences - as set out in her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Material*<sup>12</sup>. Chapter two, "The Public Face of Abu Ghraib", takes its point of departure in the three at this stage, established image categories of "Hooded Man", "Man on Leash" and "Piled Bodies", though with some emphasis on the first one. The chapter aims at describing and discussing the current situation and problems of a predominant iconic reading principally represented by WJT Mitchell and Susan Sontag. Chapter three, "The Image of the Human Body", is a significant chapter as it both responds to chapter two and adds to it, but outside the limitations of the iconic reading. Chapter three takes its point of departure in the two terms "human" and "body" as well as the two problematic aspects of subject/object and human/animal, principally discussed through the "abject" presented in the book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva<sup>13</sup>. It is also in this particular chapter that the actual penetration of the "public face" is realised and speaks for itself. Chapter four, "Digital Sites" is the last chapter before the Conclusion. Unlike the former two chapters in which the site of the image itself is of central concern, chapter four aims at resuming the discussion on the third site of meaning, namely the site of audiences, which was introduced in chapter one. The purpose is to further reflect on the digital quality of the images themselves and the digital context of the laptop screen in order to complete the circle of the image's proper meaning.

This thesis is of vital importance as it provides an additional as well as alternative view on the Abu Ghraib images, and the way they have been dealt with so far in the academic field. Through the abject theory one can achieve a deeper discussion and so

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<sup>12</sup>Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Material*, 2nd edn. Sage Publications Ltd. London: (2001) 2007

<sup>13</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York: 1982

understanding of the images and what they depict as well as of the predominant iconic view.

The attention is focused on the visual empirical material of interest and the visual aspects of the Abu Ghraib scandal rather than military and political policy. Of course, these are factors which do not exclude one another, yet the aim is not to go “behind” the images in a military or political sense but visually. Further this thesis distances itself from publications and material such as Philip Gourevitch’s 2008 book *Standard Operation Procedure* which strives to seek out the stories “behind” the most well-known and reproduced images from the Abu Ghraib prison through a method of personal interviews with the soldiers who were said to have taken the pictures<sup>14</sup>. There are three reasons for not including such references. Firstly, interview as a method risks setting leading questions with constructed answers as its prime outcome. Secondly, in a conflict of war such material tends to represent partiality rather than neutrality. Thirdly, in addition to what has already been stated, the focal point of this thesis is not to examine the images in a “personal” sense, but visually and theoretically.

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<sup>14</sup>Philip Gourevitch, Errol Morris, *Standing Operational Procedures: inifrån ett krig*, Atals, Stockholm: 2008



## 1. Three Sites of Meaning

In *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, Gillian Rose states there are three sites at which the meaning of an image is made: the site of production, the site of the image itself, and the site where it is seen by various audiences (the site of audiences). Each site also includes three modalities: technological, compositional, and social<sup>15</sup>.

When Gillian Rose presents her three sites of meaning she presents and applies each in the following order: site of production, site of the image itself and the site where the image is seen by various audiences. The reader is left with an impression that this particular order is correct in order to achieve the most beneficial result. Regardless of what Rose's intentions are, the three sites of meaning will here be dealt with in the same order as presented, not necessarily because it is suggested by her, but because it seems natural to start with the production of an image and end with its context. However, unlike Rose's method, the modalities will not be dealt with separately in each site of meaning as the modalities tend to overlap. Where necessary, one modality will be more emphasized than the others. The three sites of meaning is a useful method as it seeks to address an image from more than one side and provides a good view of the visual empirical material of interest.

### 1.1 Site of Production

Ever since the photographic camera was invented in the 1830s it has been used as a tool to portray and document the violence man exerts on his fellow man. However, the technological aspects have changed over time and the circumstances of the production process have always been and still are instrumental in the effect the photographic representations have. Unlike the war photography during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Abu Ghraib images are digital photographs in full colour and possess a high degree of reproducibility due to their digital quality. In spite of their characteristics as representations of war and violence, the Abu Ghraib images are to be regarded as vernacular photographs as well. Vernacular photography is defined by Nicholas Mirzoeff as photographs taken by ordinary

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<sup>15</sup>Rose, *Op.cit.*, pg.13

people and used in everyday situations<sup>16</sup>. What is important regarding the vernacular status of the Abu Ghraib images is a discussion involving both the “site of production” and the “site of audiences”. Of course one might claim that the producers of the Abu Ghraib photographs are not ordinary people as they are members of the American army assigned to a military mission: to guard the prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib at the behest of the American government. It is true, but there is another dimension to it as well that should not be disregarded. Due to the digital camera and worldwide communication possibilities in the army these days such as the internet, computers and cellular phones, the boundaries which are supposed to separate the war and the civilian world from one another are being transgressed and blurred. The outcome is an increased degree of civilian/ordinary status regarding the soldiers and a decreased or disrupted status as soldiers. Also, the fact that before the images were revealed, they were circulated electronically inside the prison among the soldiers and for instance were used as screensavers on several computers indeed add to a vernacular status<sup>17</sup>. Considering the afterlife of these images, namely that nearly 300 of them were made public and that some of them were published in news media more frequently than others makes it rather difficult to claim there is no vernacular quality. Mirzoeff argues that one has to move beyond single media analysis to map an everyday vernacular watching<sup>18</sup>. I would agree with Mirzoeff on the one hand; as laid out above it is clear that the “site of production” cannot be isolated nor excluded from the two other sites of meaning, “the site of the image itself” and “the site of audiences”. On the other hand it is still important to stress the medium itself and not exclude it like it would be of less importance, because as we have seen, it does have an impact upon the spectator outcomes.

### *1.2 Site of the Image Itself*

In the second site of meaning, “the site of the image itself” the modality of composition will be the most logical aspect to focus upon but as the term “composition” is a bit narrow, one can rather say that focus will be put on what is being depicted and how it is being depicted, which may also include aesthetic as well

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<sup>16</sup>Mirzoeff, (2005) *Op.cit.*, pp.12-13

<sup>17</sup>Mitchell, *Op.cit.*, pg.196

<sup>18</sup>Mirzoeff (2005), *Op.cit.*, pp.12-13

as formal qualities. Further, the relation between The Guardian record and the more extensive Salon record is of major interest.

### *1.2.1 Hooded Man*

The Guardian record contains 23 separate images of which three are more often reproduced in the media or referred to in academic publications than others. These three images are “Hooded Man” (fig.1), “Man on Leash” (fig.2) and “Piled Bodies” (fig.4). The image of the “Hooded Man” is one of five images in The Guardian record in which the detainee is not depicted naked. It is an image of a male body standing on top of a box. He is dressed in a dark robe and has a hood placed over his head. He appears in a cemented room with bare walls, only a couple of pipes are visible in the back. Both his arms are extended but his hands are attached to wires. The wires disappear underneath the robe, possibly connected to each other or to the genitals of the detainee. Another wire appears around his neck and all wires are fixed to the pipes in the back. The hooded man was informed that if he moved he would be electrocuted<sup>19</sup>. The hooded man and the box he is standing on together form the centre of the image. The dark robe and hood clearly emerge in contrast to the light walls, and the bare patch of skin close to the neck is the first area to be spotted and becomes a point of departure for further looking. In The Guardian record there are no other or specific variations found of this particular image, or images that appear to originate from the same situation. Yet there is one image in The Guardian record that is reminiscent of the “Hooded Man” and this is “picture 22” (fig.2), depicting a detainee dressed in a dark robe and hood. He is handcuffed to an upper tier railing in the prison, but when taking a closer look it becomes clear there are no actual and further similarities between fig.2 and the “Hooded Man” (fig.1). These two images are only regarded as similar when represented side by side in The Guardian record as they are the only two images in this record representing one single body which is not dead or naked.

When searching for the “Hooded Man” (fig.1) in the more extensive record at Salon.com it appears there are a total number of five images depicting the same body

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<sup>19</sup>Benjamin, Scherer, *Op.cit.*, pg.”chapter 4” <[http://www.salon.com/2006/03/14/chapter\\_4/](http://www.salon.com/2006/03/14/chapter_4/)>

in the same situation at the same point of time<sup>20</sup>. Three images are taken from the front (fig.8, 9, 10) and two from the side (fig.11, 12). It is obvious when comparing The Guardian record with the Salon record that “Hooded Man” (fig.1) in The Guardian record is a copy of either fig.8 or 9 in the Salon record. Further, there is an American soldier appearing halfway in one of the pictures (fig.10). He is holding a digital camera in his hands and glances down at it as if he was checking how well the images turned out. There is one last image (fig.13) in the Salon record which can also be included in the category of the “Hooded Man”. Do note the word “category” here, as that is actually what these images together form. They are in fact image categories rather than single images as indicated by The Guardian record. Fig.13 shows the same detainee but only two thirds of him appears. In this picture he looks like he is standing directly on the floor. He is carrying a box and once again he is placed in the middle of the picture and the bare patch of skin becomes the centre of attention and starting point for further looking. One possible reason for this phenomenon is that the bare patch of skin more than anything else depicted represents the human body underneath the robe and therefore is an element to identify with from a spectator’s point of view.

### *1.2.2 Man on Leash*

“Man on Leash” (fig.3) is the next image often reproduced or referred to. The image depicts a white-skinned woman dressed in American army clothing and standing on the left hand side. Her body is facing the camera and her gaze is fixed on a dark-skinned and naked male body lying in a crouched position on the cement floor, attached to a leash which she is holding on to. The face of the detainee is exposed and so is his body, except for his lower parts such as genitals and legs which fall outside the picture. Only the top of his knees appear. Although his face is exposed and facing the camera it is very difficult to tell what kind of facial expression he has, and the resolution of the image is bad. Unlike most of the images in the category of “Hooded Man” there are two bodies depicted in “picture 9” (fig.3). The detainee appears utterly subjected to the woman and there is a well pronounced perspective of we/them, physically as well as mentally. For instance, she is white-skinned and he is dark-skinned, she is standing up straight and he is lying crouched on the floor. He is

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<sup>20</sup>The Guardian.co.uk, *Op.cit.*

naked and she is dressed, she is a soldier and he is a detainee and also, she is holding on to the leash. Thus one is made aware that any perspective of we/them depends on the context in which the image is seen and by whom it is seen (site of audiences).

Another interesting as well as important observation regarding “Man on Leash” is that The Guardian’s “picture 9” (fig.3) is that particular picture which is most often referred to and reproduced in the public media and other situations, but it does not appear as an exact copy, nor is it to be found in the Salon record. At Salon.com there are three images more or less identical to The Guardian’s “picture 9”, yet all differ slightly even though it is very obvious that all three pictures were shot at the same point in time (fig. 14, 15, 16). Primary differences between The Guardian’s “picture 9” and the three pictures at Salon.com is that there is another American female soldier standing on the left hand side in two of those three images (fig.15, 16). Regarding these three images in the Salon record more of the surroundings and background is included in these photographs compared to The Guardian’s “picture 9”. Further examination by me showed that only fig.15 in the Salon record matches in detail or as much as it possibly can The Guardian’s “picture 9”. For instance, in both images the arms of the detainee are held in exactly the same position and also the standing position of the female soldier holding on to the leash is the same. Since it is less likely that The Guardian’s “picture 9” would be a picture not yet found or included in the more extensive Salon record, a more trustworthy conclusion is that “picture 9” (fig.3) is a cropped version of fig. 15 (Salon).

A cropped image is an image where information is left out and dissembled. There are two potential reasons for doing this. On the one hand it is pure information that is cut out, like the other female soldier who appears to the left in the original copy (fig.15) of “picture 9”. One might assume that this could have been done on the request of, or to the advantage of the perpetrators such as the American government among others. On the other hand, from a more general and public point of view, the erased parts of the image could be regarded as an aesthetic as well as a formal act in order to remove redundant or disturbing material. In the original copy (fig.15) found in the Salon record plastic chairs and several items are spread out and distract the sight from the two bodies which happen to be the only and most central elements in the image to identify with for a spectator or human wise. With that the two bodies are also the only two elements capable of telling a story. The cropping has transformed the

original copy (fig.15) into a simplified and much more aesthetically appealing image (fig.3). One could also claim or argue that the simplified version (fig.3) is an image transformed into an object which is much easier to watch, interpret and reproduce. In his text *Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-04*, WJT Mitchell argues in a similar vein, but in relation to the “Hooded Man” instead of “Man on Leash”. Mitchell claims that due to the simple formality and therefore memorable qualities of the image of the “Hooded Man”, as well as the fact that it is less chaotic compared to other Abu Ghraib images such as naked piled bodies, the particular image of the “Hooded Man” achieves an instant recognisability which is easily reproduced in the media<sup>21</sup>. To Mitchell the easily reproduced recognisability is of prime importance, but I would like to add that formal simplicity and less chaotic qualities is what make this picture “easy” or rather less disturbing to reproduce in the media and refer to. An image could still be aesthetically appealing despite its representation of violence or torture.

### *1.2.3 Piled Bodies*

In contrast to the former two image categories discussed, “Hooded Man” and “Man on Leash”, not a single numbered copy exists from the start which is the best known or most reproduced image when it comes to “Piled Bodies”. In The Guardian record there is a total of 4 images which could literally be referred to as “Piled Bodies” (fig.4, 5, 6, 7). Compared to “Hooded Man” and “Man on Leash” the images referred to as “Piled Bodies” are more often verbally/textually referred to than visually reproduced. One explanation among others might be that the images of piled bodies are neither formally nor aesthetically simple in the same sense as “Hooded Man” and “Man on Leash” are. Due to the nakedness the piled bodies may be regarded as more disturbing and therefore also more controversial to reproduce. There is an apparent vagueness when it comes to knowing what particular image a certain theoretician or author is referring to when mentioning “Piled Bodies”. For instance, as Mitchell states at one point: “The famous photograph of the pile of naked, hooded male bodies (...)”<sup>22</sup>. Considering this problem of references and in order to make things more practical in this thesis I have decided to choose The Guardian’s “picture 6” (fig.4) as

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<sup>21</sup>Mitchell, *Op.cit.*, pg.200

<sup>22</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.196

one's absolute point of departure in further examinations of the "Piled Bodies" image category. "Picture 6" is a suitable point of departure as it contains a larger amount of information (visual elements) compared to The Guardian's "picture 1" and "picture 14" (fig.5, 6). The last one in The Guardian record, "picture 11" (fig.7) is somewhat problematic as it depicts a high number of human bodies but possesses fewer formal qualities in common with the remaining three. "Picture 11" is shot from a longer distance and with a different angle. The bodies seen in "picture 11" become inexplicable and it is difficult to tell what really is going on except for a number of naked bodies which look like they were undoubtedly lumped together by force. "Picture 11" gives the impression that it perhaps belongs to another category or could form one on its own as the bodies are piled differently and it seems to have taken place at a different place at a different point in time. It is still important though to actually mention this particular image as I do here in relation to the remaining three images of "Piled Bodies" in The Guardian record because it does say something about the abuses and torture in general that took place at the Abu Ghraib prison, as well as showing how difficult it could be to delimit large-scaled visual empirical material.

In "picture 6" (fig.4) which is the point of departure for the examination of this particular image category of "Piled Bodies", no heads are visible as the pile of bodies is seen straight from behind. Considering The Guardian record and the Salon record in total, there are three images of the same pile of bodies as seen in "picture 6", shot from the front, but with hooded heads. Two of those three images shot from up front are actually the same image as The Guardian's "picture 1" (fig.5) and identical to fig.19 in the Salon record. The perspective of we/them is even more articulated in the category of "Piled Bodies" compared to the category of "Man on Leash". In "Piled Bodies" the pair of opposites does not only consist of one single person, as each part or given opposite is now made up of two individuals or more.

"Picture 6" could be divided into three separate spatial levels: foreground, middle ground and background. The foreground which is the bottom half of the picture, shows seven naked male bodies, seen from behind, piled on top of each other in a pyramidal formation. The Guardian record has chosen to censor the genitals and one might ask what the prime function of the censorship in this case is. Is the censoring

carried out in consideration of the audience, or rather in consideration of the depicted victim? Looking at the same picture in the Salon record (fig.21), the genitals are exposed, but on the other hand the face of the detainee in “Man on Leash” is blurred and censored in the very same record. A theory of mine regarding the censoring problematic is that blurred genitals aim foremost at protecting the spectator from what is considered to be extremely disturbing elements. The degree of what is regarded as excessively disturbing and what is not, is then set according to the cultural contexts in which the pictures are reproduced or published. On the other hand, when a face is censored, like the face of the detainee in Salon’s images of “Man on Leash”, the aim is to protect the victim rather than the spectator. To blur the face is to cut out the identity and a certain degree of human status as well. A positive outcome is that it is less likely that someone would recognise the victim in person and he or she does not need to become a public face. However, a negative outcome is that censoring the face does subsidise objectification of the depicted body and the image in general. In the long run such censorship risks staunching an in-depth understanding of an image like “Man on Leash”, for instance what it is, and what it does. Judging by the two different policies of censorship carried out by The Guardian.co.uk and Salon.com it is very clear that the degree of censorship is based on the cultural context in which the images are reproduced, regardless of what part of the human body is exposed or not exposed. From an aesthetic point of view, censorship can be compared to cropping, as in both cases visual elements are excluded with the intention of transforming the original copy, for instance in order to make it less disturbing, formally simplified, and easier to reproduce. A tormented face like the detainee in The Guardian’s record of “Man on Leash” (fig.3) or exposed genitals like the “Piled Bodies” (fig.21) in Salon’s record does require a different pair of spectacles compared to each opposed censored copy (fig.15, 4).

In all of the pictures representing piled bodies compared to “picture 6” (fig.4) the formation of the piled bodies becomes a central element in the images. The naked bodies occupy the highest amount of space, regardless of how much background is included or not. The nakedness and the inhuman representation also attract the first look, and become a prime starting point for further looking. The background is plain in all of them except for two traditional visual elements of a prison: a barred gate and



a corridor with cells on both sides. It does not add much except for enhancing the impression of torture and inhumanity already represented in the images.

### 1.3 *Site of Audiences*

The “site of audiences” is the third and last site at which the meaning of an image is made, and it means the site where the image is seen by various audiences. As Rose points out there have been various arguments regarding the “site of audiences” within the field of visual culture throughout the years. Theoreticians like John Fiske among others suggest that the “site of audiences” is the most important site at which an image’s meanings are made. Fiske uses the term “audiencing” to refer to the process by which a visual image has its meaning renegotiated, or rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances<sup>23</sup>. Fiske does have a point as all audiences bring to the image their own way of seeing which includes different practices of looking as well as different social identities and prior knowledge<sup>24</sup>. One may also claim it is not until an image is put into a context and met by an audience that proper meaning is made, but of course the audience and context will vary and generate different outcomes. A conclusion is that the “site of audiences” and the particular social aspect of it which Fiske is aiming at does not make sense and cannot be regarded as totally isolated from either the “site of production” or the “site of the image itself”, as these two sites are necessary and do contribute to a complete formation of proper meaning. The “site of audiences” relies just as much upon technological aspects as social aspects and most often these overlap.

Various forms of technology are used to produce and display an image and therefore it will control as well as have an impact on how an image is seen or experienced<sup>25</sup>. As earlier discussed under the paragraph “Site of Production”, the Abu Ghraib images are digitally produced, digitally reproduced and in this examination digitally accessed on the internet and watched on a digital laptop screen. In the article *Regarding the Torture of Others* Susan Sontag engages with the role of the digital camera and the act of taking a photograph as well as having e one’s photograph

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<sup>23</sup>Rose, *Op.cit.*, pg.22

<sup>24</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.22-25

<sup>25</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.23

taken<sup>26</sup>. For Sontag there is a parallel between the role of digital photography today and the images from Abu Ghraib. “To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one’s life (...). (...) to live is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images”<sup>27</sup>. “[Today] people record all aspects of their lives, store them in computer files and send the files around”<sup>28</sup>. What Sontag is aiming at is once again a vernacular status of the Abu Ghraib images. However, it is not only about what is seen in the Abu Ghraib images and what they depict which is of importance to Sontag. It is just as much the fact that the photographs were taken. Sontag is right, the “site of the image itself” is not to be separated from the “site of production”, but she seems to forget about the reception of the images. By not including the third site of meaning, which is the site of audiences, involving the digital context in which the Abu Ghraib images are seen and accessed into her discussion, Sontag’s argument unfortunately lacks strength. The digital context and the digital quality of the Abu Ghraib images posit two aspects of importance: endless reproducibility and ceaseless access. These two aspects are not the sole domain of the “site of audiences” as they are just as much instrumental in the site of the image itself and the site of production as well, but at this stage this discussion will be temporarily postponed and resumed in chapter four again, because throughout the following two chapters one will gain additional insights which could be useful to take into account.

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<sup>26</sup>Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, retrieved: 1 Dec 2011, ELIN@Lund

<sup>27</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg. ”section III”

<sup>28</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg. “section II”

## 2. The Public Face of Abu Ghraib

Richard Dienst claims in an article, *Catastrophe and Metonymy* that the images from Abu Ghraib prison quickly developed into icons<sup>29</sup>. Dienst's statement is a generalised statement as he does not mention or points to any particular group or a specific image from Abu Ghraib. On the other hand, his observation of the Abu Ghraib images as icons is interesting. Ever since 2004, when the first sample of images were revealed to the public, the iconic status of the images has grown into to be more or less universally accepted in academic as well as in general circles. The term "icon" originally derives from the Greek word "εἰκών", meaning "likeness", "image", "portrait", "semblance", "similitude" and "simile"<sup>30</sup>. The signification of the word "icon" is multiple, and bound to the given context. For instance in the context of the Orthodox Church, an "icon" refers to a representation of a sacred personage, often in painting or mosaic, and is itself regarded as sacred and honoured with worship or adoration, but this is not how the term icon is used in this thesis and in relation to the Abu Ghraib images<sup>31</sup>. In relation to the Abu Ghraib images there are two ways to interpret and use the frequently recurring phrasing(s) "image icon" and/or "iconic image". From a semiotic point of view and following Charles Sander Pierce's model, the iconic sign could be regarded as separated from the symbolic sign. The iconic sign to Pierce resembles its object in some way, whereas the symbolic sign does not bear an obvious relationship to its object<sup>32</sup>. From a rather general point of view, unlike Pierce, one does not have to separate the iconic sign from the symbolic sign, which means an "image icon" or "iconic image" can be regarded as an image which refers to something outside of its individual components, something or someone that has great symbolic meaning for many people, and this is also the way the signification will be used and examined in this text in relation to the Abu Ghraib images<sup>33</sup>. Of course the symbolic sign in itself also could be assigned two different meanings as well; one "piercian" in which signification rests on

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<sup>29</sup>Dienst, Richard., "Catastrophe and Metonymy" in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2006 5:114, retrieved: 26 Jan 2012, Summon@Lund, pg.114

<sup>30</sup>'icon' in *Oxford English Dictionary* online Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1989, retrieved: 29 March 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/view/Entry/90879?redirectedFrom=icon#eid>>

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>Marita Sturken, Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York: 2001 pg.140

<sup>33</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.36

convention, not resemblance, and one general which is a sign invested with collective meaning<sup>34</sup>.

If one regards iconicity as a feature of the reading rather than as a feature of the image, the ordinary signification of the term “icon” entails two different types of readings. On the one hand one could talk about an iconic reading of an image where already established pictorial categories function as prime referents; the Christian iconology for instance. On the other hand, it could be an iconic reading aiming at creating new forms of images and thereby transforming the original image, for instance changing the “Hooded Man” into an object. The latter may be protest posters, propaganda pictures (image as weapon), works of art, etc. Hence the two separate readings do not always exclude one another.

### *2.1 Pre-Established Pictorial Categories as Image’s Prime Referents*

Regarding the three image categories, “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” there is one category which, compared to the remaining two, is referred to as iconic on a more frequent basis: the “Hooded Man”. WJT Mitchell states that the image of the “Hooded Man” has become iconic of the entire Abu Ghraib and perhaps the whole “war on terror”<sup>35</sup>. When Mitchell refers to the “Hooded Man” he does not refer to the entire category of the “Hooded Man” presented in chapter one. He only refers to one single image, which is the particular image presented in The Guardian record (fig.1).

Mitchell takes on an iconic approach including a reading of the image of the “Hooded Man” based on pre-established pictorial categories as his prime referents. To him the figure of the hooded man resembles a Christlike figure and Mitchell argues for a synthesis of the three distinct moments from the Christian iconography of the passion of Christ, where the first moment represents the mocking of Christ and usually shows him blindfolded. The second moment, representing the “Ecce Homo” (behold the man), shows Jesus with the crown of thorns and sometimes standing on a pedestal. The third moment “Man of Sorrows” representing Jesus taken down from the cross as a washed body and prepared for entombment, often displayed with arms

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<sup>34</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.140

<sup>35</sup>Mitchell, *Op.cit.*, pg.200

in a position similar to the arms of the “Hooded Man”, which is a position of arms out at 4 and 8 o’clock<sup>36</sup>. In what seems to be an attempt to clarify and thereby to visualise his arguments, Mitchell also refers to a painted mural by Fra Angelico, made in Italy during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The mural is a depiction of the third moment of the iconography of the passion of Christ; “Man of Sorrows” like Mitchell says, and the title is *Entombment of Christ* (fig.22)<sup>37</sup>. The outcome of Mitchell’s arguments is that in order to gain an appropriate understanding and establish a relation to the single Abu Ghraib image of the “Hooded Man”, Mitchell seeks possible referents outside the image itself and the image’s individual components. His referents, such as the iconography of the passion of Christ are previously familiar to him and have a symbolic meaning to him as well as many other individuals. Sturken and Cartwright argue that icons are often perceived to represent universal concepts or meanings; an image which is produced in a specific culture, time and place is considered to have the capacity to evoke similar responses across all cultures and in all viewers. However, Sturken and Cartwright quite rightly point out that this is not necessarily the case because context as well as perceiver does matter<sup>38</sup>. In comparing the two images “Hooded Man” (fig.1) and “Man of Sorrows” (fig.22), the resemblances between them established by Mitchell go without saying, but from an aesthetic and formal point of view rather than an iconic one. Anyone looking at the image of the “Hooded Man” could agree when reading in Mitchell’s text that the position of the hooded man’s arms is similar to the position of the arms seen in “Man of Sorrows”. What is not given, even though Mitchell seems to put it that way, is that the iconographic reading is not universal as presented in the context of the text *Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-04* since it is due to subjective perspectives of Mitchell’s and does not apply to every single spectator in every single context.

Summing up; the iconographic reading of the Abu Ghraib image of the “Hooded Man” by Mitchell entails a strong tendency to seek possible referents outside the image’s individual components in order to understand what is being depicted. Instead of approaching the image for the image it is and the hooded man seen in it as a subject put in a specific situation, the hooded man as well as the image are transformed into objects to be compared to two types of already existing images; the

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<sup>36</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.200-202

<sup>37</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.201-202

<sup>38</sup>Sturken, Cartwright, *Op.cit.*, pp.36-39

Christian iconography of the passion of Christ and a 15<sup>th</sup> century Western mural. One might ask the question why one seeks an understanding of a disturbing motive in already existing and well known images and referents. A possible answer would be that it is a more or less a natural way to go, but somewhat simplified. It is natural because any spectator will always possess a register of former experiences as well as a register of images seen or known of. Similar to a defence mechanism these images are easily accessed at first when put in front of a disturbing image and the referents rather than the actual image in question create meaning; thereby the simplification occurs.

Regarding the Abu Ghraib images in general and the specific single image of the “Hooded Man” (fig.1), Mitchell is not alone in presenting an iconic approach. In fact, the iconic approach to these images appears to be the most dominant reading, perhaps due to the problem of a natural defence mechanism. Susan Sontag presents an iconic approach as well when she writes about the Abu Ghraib scandal in her article *Regarding the Torture of Others*, written in May 2004, shortly after the first images were revealed to the public<sup>39</sup>. In order to create an understanding of what the images are and could mean, Sontag like Mitchell seeks her referents outside the images in terms of established pictorial traditions and other or similar historical occurrences, like the American lynching between the 1880s and the 1930s, the Second World War as well as the world of film and videogames. Sontag writes “German soldiers in the Second World War took photographs of the atrocities they were committing in Poland and Russia (...) as may be seen in a book just published, ‘Photographing the Holocaust’ by Janina Struk. If there is something comparable to what these pictures (Abu Ghraib) show it would be some of the photographs of black victims of lynching taken between the 1880’s and 1930’s...”<sup>40</sup>. Also, “...starting with the videogames of killing that is a principal entertainment of boys – can the videogame of “Interrogating the Terrorists” really be far behind? ...”<sup>41</sup>. Even though the iconic reading presented by Mitchell and Sontag could be a natural way to go it does come with a weakness as it leaves out of account a more detailed discussion of the image itself and other conceivable referents.

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<sup>39</sup>Sontag (2004), *Op.cit.*

<sup>40</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.part II

<sup>41</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.part III

## 2.2 Iconic Images Transformed into new Icons of new Meanings

Unlike the situation in which Mitchell and Sontag strive to understand an image by seeking its referents in a historical perspective or through other already existing pictorial categories placed outside the actual image and its individual components, an iconic reading could also imply a reading based on an onward perspective. It is a procedure or a reading transforming the original image of interest, the “Hooded Man” for instance, into a new form of image invested with new meanings. Once again the single and canonical copy of the “Hooded Man” (fig.1) published in *The Guardian* record will be of central concern.

Like Mitchell points out, the “Hooded Man” has appeared throughout the world, on television, over the internet, in protest posters, in murals, as graffiti and in works of art from Baghdad to Berkeley<sup>42</sup>. A specific example is a mural in Baghdad made by Iraqi artist Sallah Edine Sallat (date unknown) showing the figure of the “Hooded Man” and the figure of the American Statue of Liberty (fig.23). The former is painted in black and the latter in white with black contours. The figure of the “Hooded Man” is attached to wires and placed on a box just like the original picture from Abu Ghraib. The Statue of Liberty is placed to the left and slightly behind the “Hooded Man”, reaching with the left arm for a box of power switches. The face of the Statue of Liberty is hooded similar to the “Hooded Man” except for two holes where the eyes are. Mitchell does not comment much on Sallat’s mural except for noticing that the only difference between the two figures is as simple as black and white – the black robe and hood of the Iraqi, and the white robe and hood (with eye holes) of the Statue of Liberty and therefore to him, portrayed as a knight of the Ku Klux Klan. To Mitchell the mural undoubtedly took on a bit of extra irony as well, given the conspicuous inability of the US occupation forces to restore electric power and other vital services to the Iraqi infrastructure<sup>43</sup>. Regarding the two figures from an iconic point of view, like Mitchell does, the image is a representation of a we/them perspective. The black figure resembling the image of the “Hooded Man” from Abu Ghraib is transformed into a “we” considering the Baghdad context in which it is placed and made. In the same context, the Statue of Liberty is transformed into a “them” (Americans). However, this particular perspective of we/them need not

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<sup>42</sup>Mitchell, *Op.cit.*, pg.204

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

be applied only one way. In the very same Baghdad context the perspective of we/them could be read the other way around in which the figure of the “Hooded Man” is to the American troops a “them” (Iraqis), whereas the Statue of Liberty is “us”. This shows two things; the meaning of an iconic image is not universally applicable as it depends on the context and the spectator. Secondly, that iconic reading may produce new images and new meanings.

One could further ask the question what the relation is between the photography of the “Hooded Man” and the mural figure of the “Hooded Man”. First, the mural does not directly draw upon the actual occurrence behind the photograph as much as it draws upon the actual existence of the photograph. Three separate components of question/interest exist. 1. A subject – the man in the original photograph who is covered by a dark robe and hood and put into the situation of torture (reality). 2. An icon - the photograph and its representation of the “Hooded Man”. 3. The figure of the “Hooded Man” in the Baghdad mural – an icon with added iconic meaning. Mitchell’s reading of the mural only takes the two latter components into consideration and leaves out the first one which represents the subject depicted in the original photograph. The stage between the two latter components then comes to resemble a re-usage of the original photograph of the “Hooded Man” in a new image, in this case the mural figure of different formal as well as aesthetic qualities and new meanings built upon the photograph, and in the end the mural becomes another icon on its own. Sontag also points this out in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, claiming that the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they only remember through photographs, which eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering<sup>44</sup>. One example of hers’ is the photographs taken when the concentration camps were liberated in 1945 – which has become what most people in general associate with Nazism and the miseries of the Second World War. One does not recall a story as much as calling up a picture<sup>45</sup>.

Similar to the iconic reading where one seeks already existing images as one’s prime referents, the iconic reading generating new forms of images generalises the actual

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<sup>44</sup>Susan Sontag., *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, London: 2003 pg.79

<sup>45</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.79-80



image of interest and its depicted elements. The outcome is an image of object status rather than an image discussed as an image in itself.

### 2.3 *The Public Face of Abu Ghraib*

Neither of the two iconic readings presented in this chapter are to be viewed as incorrect, but there is nevertheless a need to question them which very seldom happens, at least not when it comes to the Abu Ghraib images and especially not when it comes to the “Hooded Man” (fig.1). There is a vital need for alternative and in-depth readings of the most well-known Abu Ghraib images brought to attention in chapter one as the iconic approach has grown into a normative way of how to relate to and look at these particular images. Once again, Sontag is a scholar who has written plenty of articles and texts on the history of war photography and how photographs often are considered as tools of war<sup>46</sup>. Nicholas Mirzoeff is yet another scholar who has written a book on the role of images in the context of a globalized world and the war on terror; *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*<sup>47</sup>. Mirzoeff is interesting because his book, which was written in 2005, represents a nuanced iconic approach and in a more specific way an iconic perspective where images are transformed into new images. The images produced in relation to the war on terror, from both “sides” of the enemy line, are regarded by Mirzoeff, like Sontag, as objects equal to weapons. When reading his book with an interest in the Abu Ghraib images one will be surprised that there is not a single page where the scandal is brought up to be discussed or mentioned. However, one year later Mirzoeff published an article in *Radical History Review* under the title of *Invisible Empire: Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib*<sup>48</sup>. This in an article with a completely different focus and approach from his book. The article is less focused on the Abu Ghraib images as icons and more focused upon the images as representation of pornography and sexual abuses in relation to the human body. What is even more interesting is that unlike Mitchell and Sontag, Mirzoeff shows an in-depth interest in images; some found in the category of “Piled Bodies” rather than the single image of the “Hooded Man”.

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<sup>46</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.1-117

<sup>47</sup>Mirzoeff (2005), *Op.cit.*,

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Invisible Empire: Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib” in *Radical History Review*, Issue 95 Spring 2006, retrieved: 27 March 2012, Summon@Lund, pp.21-44

The iconic reading of the “Hooded Man” has throughout the years turned into a state or quality to be compared to a public face. The public face is how the general public and most people writing about or using the Abu Ghraib images relate to them. One could also ask the question why the particular image of the “Hooded Man” (fig.1) so often is considered and brought up as an icon or read as an iconic image compared to the remaining two single and well-known images in the categories of “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies”. As previously brought up in relation to Gillian Rose’s “three sites of meaning” in chapter one and stated by Mitchell, the “Hooded Man” due to its formal simplicity and non-nakedness, differentiates itself from the degrading pornographic spectacles of enforced nakedness and humiliation characterizing the other two categories, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies”. The formal simplicity goes hand in hand with the problematic aspects of cropping pointed out regarding the “Man on Leash” image; these images are slightly easier to look at and thereby to reproduce in various contexts. The two categories “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” are read as icons as well but not to the extent of the single image of the “Hooded Man”. Mitchell refers at one point in the very text previously discussed, to the Christian iconography when watching the canonical cropped image of “Man on Leash” (fig.3). Mitchell points out that there are frequently motifs in the scenes of the mocking of Christ in which he is led on a leash<sup>49</sup>. The latter two categories are often seen in the iconic reading where the photographs are transformed into new forms of images, such as photo montages and items, Lego figures among others.

Further, how come the three particular single images from each category have become so often referred to, used and well known compared to all the images in total from Abu Ghraib? There were only about 23 images revealed and circulated in public during the first years after May 2004. The Salon.com record was not published until 2006. Of course that could be a natural explanation but one cannot exclude the presumption that the larger number of 279 images, were known at that time to inner circles of the US government and US army (CID investigations). The three single and most well-known and iconic images from Abu Ghraib (fig.1, 3, 4.) which in fact are categories, could all be labelled as offensively disturbing images, but taking the entire categories and the entire Salon.com record in to account, there

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<sup>49</sup>Mitchell, *Op.cit.*, pg.202

are worse. The three single copies (fig.1, 3, 4) compared to the remaining ones are just on the border of being too disturbing and just bearable. The remaining numbers of images in the three categories are lately easy to access and have been for a longer period of time, but it is very rare that they are taken into account. The neglecting of the extended sample and number of images available is a problem. It is a problem because the awareness and examination of such a phenomenon will radically transform the meaning of the Abu Ghraib images and at the same time it is one way to actually start to understand what is being depicted and what is taking place in the image and how it relates to a given spectator. It clearly requires another pair of tools as well as another pair of spectacles and that the next chapter will provide.

### 3. The Image of the Human Body

The aim of this chapter is not to rebut or to entirely abandon the iconic reading presented by Mitchell and Sontag in the previous chapter. The aim is rather to add to the iconic reading but outside its limitations by penetrating its status as a public face. The iconic reading of the three most representative images of each category is in many ways natural and there is no point in denying it. However, it does make sense to question the iconic reading in order to understand what may be hidden underneath. In this chapter, reality rather than already existing images will be considered as the images' prime referent. The two terms "body" and "human" are a central concern here, as well as the problematic distinction between subject/object and human/animal. These are further problematic concepts elaborated on through discussions based on the abject as presented by Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*<sup>50</sup>.

#### 3.1 Traditional Concept of "Body" and "Human" Denied

In chapter two, "The Public Face of Abu Ghraib", the aim was to point out that an iconic reading of the three single and most representative images of "Hooded Man" (fig.1), "Man on Leash" (fig.2) and "Piled Bodies" (fig.4) reduces the images as well as what they depict to a status of iconic objects rather than images in themselves and images depicting human bodies. This as its prime referents are already existing images or as in the second type of iconic reading when the images themselves are transformed into new images of new meanings. An alternative reading of these three particular photographs along each image category is a view based on images as images in themselves, and the depicted bodies as subjects rather than objects. Instead of already existing images, reality is to be one's prime referent. Reality as one's prime referent entails an inescapable problem that cannot to be ignored as a photographic image always is a representation and does not posit any truth value in that sense. It is a discussion which has already been in progress for a considerable period of time and there does not seem to be an end to it. According to Hal Foster there are two basic models of representation: a simulacral reading and a referential

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<sup>50</sup>Kristeva, *Op.cit.*

point of view<sup>51</sup>. The simulacral reading advocated by poststructuralists like Jean Baudrillard among others, claim that all images can do is represent other images and that all forms of representations (including realism) are auto-referential codes. Alternatively, a referential point of view advocated by Thomas Crow among others, claims that images are attached to referents; to iconographic themes or real things in the world<sup>52</sup>. In any case two possible responses to this are: firstly, it is very unlikely from a logical point of view that the two basic models of representation exclude one another entirely. Secondly, if one necessarily has to put a certain argument about an image's referent into any of these two categories, I would in consideration of what has been discussed in chapter two, advocate that iconographic themes as referents belong to a simulacral reading rather than to the referential point of view, as iconographic themes, as discussed, equal already existing images. That said, it would be unreasonable to theorize about the Abu Ghraib photos without considering the actual events they depict.

Regarding the six images of the "Hooded Man" category it is as much a situation which has taken place in real life as it is an image. This is an indexical quality which is characterized for photographic representations of a documentary nature. From a semiotic point of view, based on Charles Sander Pierce's model, indexical signs are defined by an "existential" relationship between the signifier and the signified<sup>53</sup>. The images depict a situation of harm and torture towards the identity and the physical body of the "other", carried out by US military soldiers. The hooded man who appears in these six images is a subject who possesses an identity and a personality. There is no reliable information about who this person is or what his name is. Most likely it would make no difference if these were known. Like Judith Butler writes in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* asking the question if one laments the lack of the names of the detainees depicted in the Salon record. Butler's answer is yes and no, as they are and are not ours to know<sup>54</sup>. There is a point in Butler's comment as the name of the hooded man could easily become another objectifying label in addition to that of a victim and detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison.

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<sup>51</sup>Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: 1996 pg.128

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>Sturken, Cartwright, *Op.cit.*, pg.140

<sup>54</sup>Butler, *Op.cit.*, pg. 95

Using reality as one's prime referent does not include the intention to get to know the depicted subject in person or to learn his personal story in detail. Firstly, because that is impossible, it will always be a construction. Secondly, that sort of information is not necessary in order to be able to approach him as a subject rather than an object. The awareness of the depicted figure as a subject in a human body is enough. This is also the approach and view of interest which from here on will be further explored.

In the category of the "Hooded Man" the hood appears in every single picture, whereas in the category of "Piled Bodies" it only appears in two pictures taken from the front. Even though one approaches the hooded figures in both these categories as human subjects, there is still the problematic presence of the hood and its impact upon subjectivity and the term "body" in a traditional sense. The hood gives an indication of a head, yet facial features are erased. The face is that part of the human body which contains all five of the human senses as well as the best capacity of expressing one's personal emotions, verbally as well as physically. The face is a key of communication. If one looks at the hooded bodies and the positions they are placed in, it is not possible to tell to what extent they might be crying, feel terrified or enraged. Erasing a face does equate erasure of human status as it clearly disassembles essential corporeal functions. The term "body" in a traditional everyday sense is also heavily reduced. It is almost as if the depicted body has been decapitated. Traditionally a decapitated body is no longer considered a body but is more often referred to as a corpse. The difference between a corpse in this sense and the bodies seen in the pictures is further a question of being alive or not. On the other hand, the still image photographic quality enhances an aspect of the depicted bodies as more dead than alive, at least from a spectator's point of view. The outcome here is not what I originally expected when setting the outlines for this thesis. The hood is an element that reduces the degree of human status as well as denying a complete and well-functioning body that one could expect in a traditional sense but the truth is that it becomes very problematic to entirely refer to the depicted bodies in the images as pure subjects.

Considering the image category of "Piled Bodies", the compression of bodies is problematic in a sense similar to that of the hood. The compression of two or several bodies together reduces the condition of a free standing individual body. To store or keep things in compressed piles is something humans normally do with items other

than human beings. The five images of “Piled Bodies” in the Salon record which include the copies from The Guardian record show at least three different sorts of compressed formations. Regardless of the number of bodies involved, each body in a traditional sense is reduced to an existence similar to that of a brick in a larger unit. Individuality is lost in the duplication. The nakedness in itself, and in some images combined with the hood, informs and enhances the impression of a larger unit rather than a formation of individual subjects. The nakedness has yet another de-individualising aspect as an individual’s clothing is commonly used to express one’s personality and identity. No faces are exposed in the “Piled Bodies”; they are either covered by a hood or not visible as the pictures are shot from straight behind. Once again it is difficult to relate to the depicted bodies as “bodies” in a traditional sense, and it is even more difficult to fully relate to them as individual subjects.

Another central aspect in the category of “Piled Bodies” is a problematic border between human and animal. The occurrence of compression in itself creates associations with how animals are treated in industrial captivity. The presence of the perpetrators, the US military soldiers in two of the photographs, enhances an impression of animalistic features. The pyramidal formations are arranged by the US soldiers. There is an indication that the subjective will and subjective status in the portrayed victims has been broken down and that their submission is being documented. Force and humiliation is further enhanced by the fact of it being photographed. It is also fair to assume that the piled formations were created from the start with the intention and function of being photographic motifs. In his article *Invisible Empire: Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib*, Mirzoeff points out in relation to some images of the piled bodies in Abu Ghraib prison, that photographs were taken as a record of the dominance of the photographers over the physical and corporeal space and time. According to Mirzoeff to the perpetrators the bodies of the detainees are to the perpetrators only a spectacle, a mode of domination made visible<sup>55</sup>. Mirzoeff does have a point as the outcome is once again a problematic differentiation between subject/object as well as master/slave or human/animal, which also to some extent applies to the third and last image category, “Man on Leash”.

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<sup>55</sup>Mirzoeff (2006), *Op.cit.*, pp.24-25

The most well-known image of “Man on Leash” as mentioned in chapter one, is the cropped version found in The Guardian record (fig.3) of fig.15 in the Salon record. If one does not take the censorship of the detainee’s face in the Salon record into account, this is the only category in which the face of the detainee is exposed (fig.3). Compared to the categories of “Hooded Man” and “Piled Bodies”, one could in this category refer to the depicted body as a complete and well-functioning body in a traditional sense. The body in “Man on Leash” is not “decapitated”. With his face exposed it is also much easier to refer to him as a subject. Looking at his face one unquestionably feels compassion in a way not suggested by the other two categories. The fact that he is tied up and kept on a leash, naked and put in a subjugated position on the concrete floor still makes one come back to the question of animalistic features. Further, in this case it is possible to talk about a “body” in a traditional sense and a subject, but the degree of humanity is clearly reduced and turned into a higher degree of animalism. Therefore in the category “Man on Leash”, a denial of the term “human” is much more of central concern than “body”.

Considering objectification and subjectivity of the perpetrators the problem is that of the direct opposite of the victims. The perpetrators are not being denied their status as a body or their humanity by stature or modifications but by their actions. There are no hoods covering their faces or facial expressions, their statures encompass fully normal human behaviour. It is in contrast to their victims and actions that they are denied their humanity and objectified as soldiers and perpetrators. In the Salon record the names of the American soldiers are written out along with their military rank and made public. This means their privacy has been violated and this has an objectifying impact. The name of Lynndie England has in itself achieved an iconic status near a public face just as much as the images themselves.

### *3.2 Abject – Neither a Subject nor an Object*

As discovered in the previous paragraph there is a problematic aspect to the reading of the depicted bodies of the detainees as subjects, foremost due to the denial of the term “body” in a traditional sense; clearly seen in the two categories of “Hooded Man” and “Piled Bodies”. There is also a denial of the term “human” as the degree of humanity is reduced into a higher degree of animalism, foremost due to a master/slave relationship between the depicted bodies of the detainees and the



perpetrators. At this stage it appears no longer logical to approach the depicted bodies exclusively as subjects or objects. It is most unlikely that these two absolute opposites would exclude one another and therefore a third definition is required: the abject.

The abject is neither a subject nor an object. The abject asserts itself on the demarcation line between the subject and the object where proper meaning collapses<sup>56</sup>. The subject and the object are two established opposites which gain mutual meaning through their existence as a pair of opposites. Unlike the object, the abject does not grant any meaning to the subject. Instead it threatens to destroy it. The abject possesses one quality of the object which is that of being opposed to “I”<sup>57</sup>. The threat occurs and is enhanced by the fact that the abject at the same time opposes yet is too similar or close to the subject<sup>58</sup>. Kristeva states that the abject is brought into existence through a state of abjection which is something emanating from an exorbitant outside or inside<sup>59</sup>. It might be something positioned quite close to you, but yet not possible to assimilate. The abject may beseech one, worry one or fascinate desires; it is not me, not that, but nothing either. It is a “something” that I/one do(es) not recognize as a thing<sup>60</sup>. Pronounced examples throughout her book are corporeal excrements and the corpse among others. The term “abjection” in itself originally derives from the Latin *abjicere* which in English could be translated as “to repel”<sup>61</sup>.

The causes for abjection do not necessarily have to be lack of cleanliness or lack of health, but rather what disturbs identity, systems and order. That which does not respect certain borders, positions or rules. That which is in-between, the ambiguous, the composite<sup>62</sup>. Borders are a central as well as an essential concept within the abject theory. According to Kristeva, the corpse is the outermost of abjection as it is clearly death infecting life<sup>63</sup>. However, the corpse does not necessarily have to signify death, as a corpse can mark what one permanently thrusts aside in order to

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<sup>56</sup>Kristeva, *Op.cit.*, pp.1-2

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.1

<sup>60</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.1-2

<sup>61</sup>Rehal, Agneta., “Preface” in *Fasans Makt: en essä om abjektionen*, Kristeva, Julia., Bokförlaget Daidalos AB, Göteborg: 1991 pg.15 (author’s translation)

<sup>62</sup>Kristeva, *Op.cit.*, pg.4

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

live<sup>64</sup>. The reduced “body” and the reduced subjective status in the categories of “Hooded Man” and “Piled Bodies” posit indications of a corpse such as “decapitation” and heavily reduced corporeal functions due to the hood and piles. The same thing applies when it comes to the loss of individuality through duplication and nakedness. The reduced bodies in the images are not dead, but denied the traditional status of a complete and well-functioning “body”. The depicted detainees are in a position between a subject and an object, exhibiting mechanisms related to a corpse. The outcome is a threat to a subjective status, not in themselves but towards a subject which could be a spectator looking at them. Kristeva states, “There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, by being alive, from that border”<sup>65</sup>. And “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, ‘I’ is expelled. The border has become an abject”<sup>66</sup>.

Another central concept of Kristeva’s is that of a border between man and animal. This is expressed through the outlined problematics of a reduced human status and an increased degree of animalism, foremost seen in the two image categories of “Piled Bodies” and “Man on Leash”. According to Kristeva the abject confronts us with those fragile states where man strays on to the territories of an animal<sup>67</sup>. Also, “(...) by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animal and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder”<sup>68</sup>. These statements of hers also give an indication of a border between the two polemics yet pairs of opposites: civilized and uncivilized. Sexual as well as pornographic features are represented in the two image categories of “Piled Bodies” and “Man on Leash”. They are represented through nakedness and sodomy due to the compressed formations of naked male bodies in the first category and principally the leash in the latter. The representation of murder appears through and in combination with the “de facto” torture taking place. “De facto” torture here means that its prime referent is

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<sup>64</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.3

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.3-4

<sup>67</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.12

<sup>68</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.12-13

reality rather than pre-existing images. It points at the indexical quality of the photographic images which enhances the representation of the depicted actions. Both the murder aspects and the sexual aspects indicate a primitive and perhaps also an uncivilized behaviour as it clearly draws upon animal behaviour of violence, dominance and copulation. The animalistic and uncivilized behaviour is like the existence of the hood causing a reduced “body” and subject. These behaviours are abject factors and not only threatening to the subject but also to the entire degrees of human status.

### *3.3 Abject of Crime and Fragility of Law*

In the perpetrators the abjection is found in their actions rather than their stature and appearance. As an extension on the discussion on the corpse, Kristeva brings in a perspective on crimes as abject. She states: “The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour... Any crime because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge is even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility”<sup>69</sup>. Several of these aspects of crime are present in all three categories of images from Abu Ghraib, but especially in the two categories of “Piled Bodies” and “Man on Leash” in which perpetrator and victim most frequently appear side by side.

There is an obvious premeditation in the photographs themselves, as their scenery has been arranged with the intention of being photographic motifs. Another type of premeditation is found in how these images relate to the entire American military operation and presence in Iraq and more specifically at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. Mark Danner points out in his text *The Logic of Torture* how the US military soldiers had received orders beforehand and been provided with information on how to make the life and situation difficult for any possible detainee. The soldiers were also encouraged to act as harshly as possible towards the detainees in order to maximise the efficiency of interrogations<sup>70</sup>. The posing soldiers, smiling and giving their thumbs up, also equate the shameless aspect of the abject of crime. Their

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<sup>69</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.4

<sup>70</sup>Mark Danner, “The Logic of Torture” in Mark Danner et.al. (eds.) *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley: 2004 pp.17-46

embodied expressions indicate a pleasure or satisfaction in their actions and position of power.

In the perpetrators there is also a representation of hypocrisy and what Kristeva describes as “the killer who claims he is a saviour”. The depicted perpetrators are soldiers claiming to be fighting in a war on terror, but instead they appear to have established their own reign of terror within the walls of the Abu Ghraib prison. They have themselves become what they originally were supposed to destroy. Distinct borders of we/them, good/evil and civilized/uncivilized are transgressed but with abjection as the foremost result rather than liberation which was claimed by the American government to be the prime motive of the Iraq war.

### *3.4 Extended Discussion on We/Them*

The formation and existence of a we/them in the iconic reading can through the abject theory be extended and become more profound outside its limitations. Such an extended discussion will contribute to the penetration of the public face as well as to a deeper understanding of it. When applying a “we” and a “them” on two abjects the outcome is that the abject labelled “we” is brought closer to the subject, whereas the abject labelled “them” is moved further away from the subject. If given that the subject is the spectator and that the subject identifies with the perpetrators from an ethnical, cultural or social Western point of view, the perpetrators are the abject labelled “we”, and the detainees the abject labelled “them”. When the perpetrators (abject of crime) are brought closer to the subject, their threat as abject increases, while the detainees’ (abject of body/corpse, human/animal) threat as abject decreases.

In a we/them perspective, “them” threatens the “we” as an “other”. In the Abu Ghraib images the detainees, the “them”, no longer really exert a threat towards the “we” as throughout the image categories they are mentally and physically dominated by, and subjected to the “we” of the perpetrators. The relationship between the “we” and “them” is traditionally one of opposites in the sense that they provide meaning to one another. In the Abu Ghraib images meaning is provided from the abjection of the crime of the perpetrators to the detainees, “them”. This happens as they in their subjected position towards the dominance of the perpetrator’s violence and torture

become signifiers of the crimes that the “we” have committed against the “them”. In this way the “them” reflects the abjection of the crime of the “we” back towards the “we”. The outcome is a major abjection in “we” rather than in “them”. Considering this from a Western perspective the content of the images refers back to Western society. The abject of crime become not only the threat of the fragility of law, but also the fragility of Western civilization and the fragility of a Western “we”. It is an outcome quite similar to what Jean Baudrillard in his text *War Porn* defines as a simulacrum of power through abjection of war<sup>71</sup>. Referring to the Abu Ghraib images, Baudrillard states “These scenes are the illustration of power which, reaching its extreme point, no longer knows what to do with itself – a power henceforth without aim, without purpose, without a plausible enemy, and in total impunity. It is only capable of inflicting gratuitous humiliation and, as one knows, violence inflicted on others is after all only an expression of the violence inflicted on oneself<sup>72</sup>”.

This chapter has observed clear problematics when it comes to applying an object or subject status on the depicted bodies in the Abu Ghraib images, yet the applicability of the abject has proven to be useful and of vital importance. Further it has been proven that a perspective of we/them appears as well as influences this discussion and manifests itself in the following concepts of human/animal, corpse/body and the abject of crime. Worth noticing is that such a we/them perspective in fact belongs to a context and “site of audiences”. Therefore it will be of interest to look at the more prominent “site of audiences”; the digital qualities and digital context of the Abu Ghraib images in the next chapter.

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<sup>71</sup>Jean Baudrillard, “War Porn” in *Journal of Visual Culture* 2006 5:86 retrieved: 11 Feb 2011, ELIN@Lund, pp.86-88

<sup>72</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.86

## 4. Digital Sites

In chapter one the visual empirical material of interest for this thesis was introduced along with Gillian Rose's methodology of "three sites of meaning". Chapter two and chapter three have principally as well as in detail dealt with the second site of meaning; "the site of the image itself", yet from two distinct perspectives: the iconic reading on one hand, and the abject theory on the other. Since chapter one argued that the proper meaning of an image is made up from all three sites of meaning together, it is important here, before proceeding to a conclusion, to include one chapter which resumes or rather continues the initial discussion in chapter one on the digital quality of the Abu Ghraib images and the digital context in which the images have been examined and observed. The aim of chapter four is consequently to continue from where chapter one left off. Chapter one ended with a critique on a statement of Susan Sontag's. Sontag was criticised for not taking the receptive digital context into account sufficiently enough and thus reducing the strength of her otherwise incisive statements and writing on the Abu Ghraib images. Three aspects will be of central concern: reproducibility, accessibility and the context of the laptop screen. Two questions of interest are: what is the role of the digital quality of the images and the digital context in which the images are seen and experienced?

### *4.1 Endless Reproduction and Ceaseless Access*

The digital quality of the Abu Ghraib images involves two significant aspects: the endless possibility of reproduction and ceaseless access. At this stage one hypothesis is that these aspects are factors contributing to an established generalised and objective view of the three single and most recognised images of "Hooded Man" (fig.1), "Man on Leash" (fig.3) and "Piled Bodies" (fig.4). Due to the possibility of reproduction and thereby its ceaseless access these three particular images have throughout the years found their way into the virtual as well as physical commonplace of a general public in Western as well as in Eastern societies. The images appear over and over again in various forms and contexts and the more people see them the more people get used to them and develop a resistance based on a generalised approach and fluctuating glance rather than contemplation. Furthermore, the fact of the images being digital and part of a virtual world when

watched on a computer screen increases the distance between a possible spectator and what is being depicted. The digital qualities add another layer between the images and reality. However, one should here bear in mind that the Abu Ghraib images still possess indexical qualities compared to visual material such as videogames which have no existential links to reality.

Considering Hal Foster's writings on "traumatic realism" in his text *The Return of the Real*, the hypothesis laid out above could on the one hand be further extended but on the other hand questioned<sup>73</sup>. The art and artistry of Andy Warhol functions as a point of departure of Foster's, and more specifically two paintings: *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) and *White Burning Car III* (1963). Characteristic for these two paintings is a great number of copied repetitions of representations of violence. In the 1980s Warhol is quoted as saying in relation to his 1960s work: 'I don't want it to be essentially the same – I want it to be *exactly* the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel'<sup>74</sup>. Considering the quote by Warhol, Foster claims it entails two aspects of repetition : a draining of significance (image as simulacrum) and defence against affect; defence of what is seen and experienced as disturbing in the images due to its indexical quality (reality as referent)<sup>75</sup>. Foster includes yet another quotation by Warhol in which Warhol states that 'When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect'<sup>76</sup>. This goes hand in hand with the hypothesis laid out above when it comes to generalisation and objectification of the three single and most recognised Abu Ghraib images in terms of endless reproducibility and ceaseless access, but taking Foster's twofold observation of repetition into account one could immediately question the last statements by Warhol as well as the laid out hypothesis on the Abu Ghraib images above. With psychoanalysis and readings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Foster reaches a point where he says that the repetitions or the repeated copies of the disturbing representations of violence in the two paintings by Warhol *re-produce* a traumatic effect just as much as it actually *produces* a trauma<sup>77</sup>. In other words, like Foster also says, through repetitions one could safeguard oneself against traumatic significance as the images are seen over

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<sup>73</sup>Foster, *Op.cit.*

<sup>74</sup>*Op.cit.*, pg.131

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup>*Op.cit.*, pp.131-132

and over again and their significance erode, but at the same time as one watches these images one actually produces a trauma as well. The repetitions according to Foster serve to screen the real understood as traumatic ( safeguard) but at the same time the repetition points to the real/pays attention to it and ruptures the screen of repetition and with that the production of a “second” trauma<sup>78</sup>.

The outcomes of Foster’s “traumatic realism” in this sense are two different yet interweaving effects due to repetition and reproduction, one could say. This also means that the hypothesis on an objective status due to the digital quality of endless reproduction and ceaseless access could be logical to some extent but there is yet another dimension to it not to be forgotten, a dimension linked to reality and a production of trauma as its prime outcome. Perhaps the second or produced trauma in the Abu Ghraib images could be further linked to the abject and the corpse discussed in the previous chapter. It seems like the abject value in the Abu Ghraib images equates the produced trauma and vice versa as the spectator (subject) most likely reacts on the trauma with same sort of threat and discomfort in terms of the abject corpse. The depicted tortured bodies and the bodies torturing in relation to the indexical quality of the images remind the spectator (subject) of what she or he could be but “thrust aside in order to live”<sup>79</sup>.

#### 4.2 *The Screen*

A second hypothesis to be tested in this chapter is that the digital context of the laptop screen contributes to a higher level of acceptance when it comes to disturbing visual materials in general but also the Abu Ghraib images in particular. Marshall McLuhan writes in his book *Understanding Media: the Extension of Man* that the characteristic of all media is that the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium<sup>80</sup>. McLuhan has a point in this statement as the digital screen is one medium but holds several other mediums like the internet, visual programmes, word-processing programmes, audio programmes etc. The list is without measurements and it shows that the internet in itself as well as the screen have the capacity to

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<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>Kristeva, *Op.cit.*, pg.3

<sup>80</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extension of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York: 1964 pg.8



encapsulate so much more information, visual, textual and verbal, in addition to or in parallel with the disturbing material in itself. There are two significant outcomes, and the first one is that the Abu Ghraib images can easily exist on the computer but unseen or hidden among other components such as files, folders and windows. The second outcome is that due to the openness of the internet a potential user or spectator will know beforehand that the web certainly will provide him or her with some degree of disturbing material regardless of what one's original intentions are. This means that the Abu Ghraib images in the digital context of the screen and the digital context of the internet, automatically and to a variable extent grow together with what else is there at the moment, or what else the computer or internet most often is used for, and so an increased level of acceptance is attained.

If one compares this with watching the very same images printed in a book or journal it is very different, or perhaps even the direct opposite of the screen and the internet. The printed images in a book or journal are fixed into a specific and uniform context; isolated from any external information that could interfere or disturb that context. With that said, the context of the Abu Ghraib images when printed in a book or journal is more controlled and uniform than when watched on the internet and/or on a laptop screen.

Jean Baudrillard argues in his text *Simulations* that "All is presented today in a spread-out series, or as a part of a line of products, and this fact alone tests you already, because you are obliged to make decisions. (...) [It] approximates our general attitude toward the world around us to that of *reading*, and to selective deciphering. We live less like users than readers and selectors, reading cells. But nevertheless: by the same token you also are constantly selected and tested by the medium itself"<sup>81</sup>. Regarding the hypothesis on an increased level of acceptance when it comes to disturbing materials due to the multi-functional and multi-information flow on the internet and the screen, Baudrillard does have a point that today one lives very much as a reader and a selector, considering all the options a spectator has when using a computer screen to watch images on. There are several and endless options; one can either watch the image where it is found in the context of the webpage, or copy or save it into a pre-formed slide show or gallery display directly on the

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<sup>81</sup>Jean Baudrillard "Simulations" in Richard Kearney, David Rasmussen (eds.) *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism, An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Oxford: 2001 pg.420

computer. One may copy and paste an image either from the web to a document or from one document to another, etc. When searching for images on the internet one could use various settings in terms of censorship and so on. Perhaps there is not much one can do about original settings in the camera turning out in images with bad resolution but one still has the options of changing the size, crop it and manipulate it in a way which is not possible with a printed copy. It is clearly not as much the digital context itself that controls the images or how they are watched, as the spectator who is also a user; watching and operating the context and images simultaneously. Having said that I am not as convinced by that part of Baudrillard's statement which claims that today one lives less like a user. In the end and as mentioned, I would say that the spectator and user in terms of the digital context and the screen have become one and further increase the reading and selection process.

## 5. Conclusion

The research objective for this thesis has been two problematic yet interwoven occurrences observed in earlier research on the Abu Ghraib scandal and its image material. In terms of methodology, a restricted amount of images and more precisely three single images; “Hooded Man” (fig.1), “Man on Leash” (fig.3) and “Piled Bodies” (fig.4) are overrepresented in earlier research as well as in the media, and often regarded as descriptive for the entire Abu Ghraib scandal. Another occurrence in terms of theory and interpretation which is a prolongation of the methodological problem: a predominantly iconic reading of these three particular images which hypothetically have provided them with an iconic surface in terms of a “public face” characterised by an object status; both when it comes to the images themselves as images, and the bodies depicted. The aim was to penetrate the “public face” of the three single and overrepresented images of interest by bringing the more extensive visual record at Salon.com into account and to advocate a treatment of the images as images in themselves as well as a view of the depicted bodies more as subjects than objects. The purpose has neither been to rebut, nor to entirely abandon the iconic reading but to question it and add to it outside its own limitations.

Through an empirical analysis of the two records, The Guardian record and the Salon record, and with Gillian Rose’s methodology of “three sites at which meaning of an image is made” as a point of departure, chapter one came to the important conclusion that the three single images “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” in fact are image categories and no single numbered images as indicated by The Guardian record and earlier research. It was also demonstrated that neither of the three sites of meaning, site of production, site of the image itself or site of audiences is to exclude one another or be regarded in isolation from the remaining two. For instance, production factors such as the digital quality of the Abu Ghraib photographs exert instrumental impact upon the origin of the images as well as the spectator outcomes.

In order to add to the iconic reading outside its limitations and penetrate the “public face” in chapter three, chapter two aimed at describing the iconic approach in detail and discuss it. The outcomes showed an occurrence of two types of iconic readings; one in which already existing pictorial categories or historical perspectives placed

outside the actual image and its individual components, function as one's prime referents in order to interpret what is depicted. This is typical of WJT Mitchell's iconic reading of the "Hooded Man" (fig.1) as a synthesised resemblance of the Christian iconology of the passion of Christ. Instead of approaching the image as the image it is and the hooded man as a subject in a specific situation, the hooded man as well as the image are met with a generalised view that tends to transform them into objects to be compared to other objects or images already existing. The second type of iconic reading is a reading based on an onward perspective and transforms the original image of interest into a new form of image invested with new meanings. In the case of the Baghdad mural by Sallah Edine Sallat the meanings of the mural principally refer to the existence of the photograph of the "Hooded Man" and less to the actual day the situation took place. A weakness these approaches have in common is a tendency to leave out of account a more detailed discussion of the image itself, and other conceivable referents.

In chapter three the actual penetration of the "public face" took place and the image categories were further taken into account. It advocated a view on the images as images in themselves and the depicted bodies as subjects rather than objects. Instead of already existing images reality was meant to function as one's prime referent, yet with an awareness of the images having a status as representations with no actual "truth" value. What is most interesting is that it was discovered quite early on that there was a problematic issue in the reading of the depicted bodies, notably of the detainees as subjects, foremost due to the denial of the term "body" in a traditional sense; clearly seen in the two categories of "Hooded Man" and "Piled Bodies". There was also a denial of the term "human" in a traditional sense as the degree of humanity was reduced into a higher degree of animalism, foremost due to the compression of bodies and a master/slave relationship between the depicted bodies of the detainees and the perpetrators. At that stage it appeared it was no longer logical to strive for an approach of the depicted bodies exclusively as subjects or objects and it seemed most unlikely that these two opposites would exclude one another entirely and so a third definition was brought in - the abject. The depicted detainees were approached as neither subjects nor objects, but as something exhibiting mechanisms similar to a corpse in an abject sense. This threatens a subjective status, not in themselves but toward a subject who could be a spectator looking at them. Also the

animalistic features indicated an abject status when one considers the border between man and animal; not only threatening to the subject but to the total degree of human status. Further the depictions and actions of the perpetrators were discussed along the lines of the abject of crime and the fragility of law. Regarding the objectification and subjectivity of the perpetrators the problematic issue was that of the direct opposite of the victims. The perpetrators are not being denied their state as a body or their humanity by stature or modifications but by their actions which also hold abjection. At least three perspectives of crime as abject were highlighted; premeditation, shamelessness and hypocrisy. This resulted in the important outcome of an extended discussion on we/them that claimed if given that the subject is a spectator and that the subject identifies with the perpetrators from a Western point of view, the perpetrators are the abject labelled “we”, and the detainees the abject labelled “them”. When the perpetrators (abject of crime) are brought closer to the subject their threat as abject increases due to their closeness, whereas the detainees’ (abject of body/corpse, human/animal) threat as abject decreases. This was further drawn into a conclusion of a reinforced abjection in the “we” rather than the “them”, as the “them” become the signifiers of the crimes that the “we” have committed against the “them” and so the abjection of crime of the “we” is reflected back towards the “we”. That said, one has moved slightly into the third site of meaning: site of audiences, which chapter four further explored.

Chapter four resumed and developed the discussion on the site of audiences initiated in chapter one in order to close the circle of proper meaning. Three aspects were of central concern: endless reproducibility and ceaseless access of the images, and the digital context of the laptop screen in which the images have been observed. A hypothesis was presented: that endless reproduction and ceaseless access are factors contributing to a generalised and objective view of the three single most recognised images of “Hooded Man”, “Man on Leash” and “Piled Bodies” as they appear over and over again and spectators develop a resistance against them. The hypothesis was tested against the concept of “traumatic realism” presented by Hal Foster in his text *The Return of the Real* with the outcome that through repetition one safeguards oneself against traumatic significance as the images are seen over and over again (significance erodes), yet the repetition points to the real and ruptures the screen of repetition and a trauma is produced nevertheless. From my point of view, it is a

trauma which the subject (spectator) most likely reacts to with the same sort of threat and discomfort as to the abject corpse. Considering the digital context of the laptop screen a second hypothesis was presented: that this context contributes to a higher level of acceptance when it comes to disturbing visual material in general but also the Abu Ghraib images in particular. One conclusion was that the Abu Ghraib images in this context of the screen and the digital context of the internet, automatically and to various extents melt together with what else is there at the moment or what else the computer or internet is most often used for; so an increased level of acceptance. Also in that sense the spectator is just as much a user/operator as a selector and reader; watching and operating the context and images simultaneously. It is not as much the context controlling the images as the spectator/operator doing it.

In conclusion there are three important findings of this research to be noted. 1. It has shown that the notion of the abject is of vital importance and beneficial for a deeper understanding of the images and what is depicted, as well as to questioning, penetrating and understanding the established “public face”. 2. It has shown that a perspective of we/them is central to encountering and reading of the Abu Ghraib images as it is clearly found in both the iconic reading and the abject reading. The number of bodies depicted does not seem to be determining factors of the existence of we/them, yet the degree and formation of it. 3. It has shown that the digital qualities of the Abu Ghraib images and the digital context and screen exert influence on the abject as well as the icon. In relation to the findings of a central we/them perspective this also has the potential to be further explored at a future opportunity.

Through several steps and each step represented by a chapter, the “public face” has been penetrated and the laid out hypothesis has been as much confirmed as dealt with. A further conclusion is that what actually is “hidden” or nearly obstructed by the “public face” are the various aspects and levels of the abject threatening the subject, due to its closeness and notion of the real. Perhaps as a natural defence mechanism the subject in this situation seeks less threatening and more concrete, manageable alternatives to base one’s understanding on such as already established pictorial categories or historical references rather than the real. The digital context of the screen and internet further enhances such postures as it is a context exclusively built upon images rather than reality as prime referents. It is almost like the images

manifest themselves as icons in a very strong state of abjection as what is closest to the subject. The perpetrators in chapter three is such an example and are more or less transformed into a symbol of the abject of crime of the “we”.

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Appendix: **The Guardian Record**  
[www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html) :



Fig.1: "Hooded Man on Box"  
Picture 4 (The Guardian record)



Fig.2  
Picture 22 (The Guardian record)



Fig.3: "Man on Leash"  
Picture 9 (The Guardian record)



Fig.4: "Piled Bodies"  
Picture 6 (The Guardian record)

Appendix: **The Guardian Record**

[www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html) :



Fig.5: “Piled Bodies”  
Picture 1 (The Guardian record)



Fig.6: “Piled Bodies”  
Picture 14 (The Guardian record)



Fig.7  
Picture 11 (The Guardian record)



Fig.8: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon.com)



Fig.9: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.10: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.11: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.12: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.13: Nov.4, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.14: Oct.24, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.15: Oct.24, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.16: Oct.24, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.17: Nov.7, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.18: Nov.7, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.19: Nov.7, 2003.  
(Salon .com)





Fig.20: Nov.7, 2003.  
(Salon .com)



Fig.21: Nov.7, 2003.  
(Salon .com)

Appendix: **Fra Angelico** <http://www.pinakothek.de/en/fra-angelico> :



Fig.22: Fra Angelico, *Entombment of Christ* ca.1438/40  
wood, 37.9x46.4 cm  
(Crown Prince Ludwig collection, Alte Pinakotek, Munich)

Appendix: **Baghdad mural** <http://bezalel.secured.co.il/8/mitchell.htm> :



Fig.23: Sallah Edine Sallat, *Hooded Man and the Statue of Liberty*  
Mural, Baghdad, Iraq, date: no information

