

War Photography in the Digital Era: A Study of the Abu Ghraib Torture Photographs

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Abstract

By the mid of twentieth century, photography evolved from the domains of professional photographers to the hands of the masses and 1990s saw a radical revolution in photography with the coming of digital cameras and internet technologies. This new shift had a huge impact on the wave of catastrophic events that occurred in the in the first decade of twenty-first century such as 9/11, Afghanistan invasion, Iraq War etc. In this new era of photography, anyone, including the soldiers, insurgents, terrorists, even the victims could be war photographers recording images from the battle field. The internet explosion that provided instant, global information changed the whole nature of image making, publishing, distributing, archiving etc drastically. This paper is an attempt to understand how the shifts that happened in the digital technologies have impacted war photography as a category by studying and analysing the most famous Abu Ghraib photographs. The making of the notoriously famous Abu Ghraib photographs and its worldwide circulation through internet marked a new phase in the whole history of war, image making, circulating and archiving as these photographs taken by the American soldiers in prison duty, intended to be circulated as personal memory among family and friends back home got aired in public and it marked a huge shift in the whole public opinion on the moral justification for the invasion back home in America and worldwide.

Key words: War photographs, Digital era, Abu Ghraib photographs, digital memory

Introduction

‘Violence provokes an enormous production of images, clips, sounds, texts’ etc (Zarzycka 2017: 1). Media plays a prominent role in the circulation and distribution of these enormous productions even among those who are not directly part of the war in the modern times. Release of the most scandalous Abu Ghraib torture photographs by CBS in 2004 and the succeeding investigations about the prison management by the American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq revealed a shocking story of the abuses and tortures that the American soldiers had done in Iraq. By studying the nature of the most scandalous Abu Ghraib torture photographs, this paper attempts to see how the emergence of the new media technologies such as digital cameras, mobile phones and internet facilities have complicated the arena of war photography and war in general. This paper tries to argue that the digital technology and image production has drastically changed the perception of war that is created through war photography. A revisiting of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs reveals that the digital temperament of the era was visible not only in the truth value that we immediately associated with these photographs after their release and in the number of photographic productions, but also in the inability of these photographs to create a larger political action later in history due to the reduced life span of images in terms of the attention given to individual photographs in a digital era.

War Photography in America

There is a long history of war photography in America ever since the invention of photography in the 19th century. War photography emerges in America evidently from the Mexican-American war of 1847 itself. 50 daguerreotypes of the war that depicted military officers of higher rank, landscapes, grave yards etc. by an unknown photographer becomes the first

photographic recordings of a war ever in the history. Thereafter, the American Civil War (1861-1865) becomes the first war widely photographed and circulated in the history of America. The well-known photographers like Alexander Gardner, Mathew Brady, Timothy H O'Sullivan recorded their first-hand experiences of the war from the battlefield with their huge cameras and related equipment producing huge number of photographs. These photographs were widely circulated in America through albums, newspapers and various books creating a market for war photography for the first time in America. In the beginning of the 20th century, Americans learned about the World War I from the photographs published in newspapers and magazines across America. The development of a market for war photographs due to its publication in newspapers and magazines in fact resulted in the production of vast numbers of photographs too. During the gap between two world wars, a proliferation of mediums such as magazines, newspapers, albums etc for the circulation of photographs also took place. Although, Americans were received updates of the 2nd World War from the national radio faster than before, image production of the war also got escalated. The Vietnam War in the second half of the 20th century marked another mile stone in American war photography and reporting. In spite of the fact that it was widely reported across America through network televisions, that became newly popular at that time, photographic accounts of the War that got produced and circulated through newspapers, magazines drastically increased. The iconic images of the war made a huge response to the American war making in distant countries from within and across the world. The 1991 Gulf War was another turning point in the history of war reporting and war photography as the American public watched the Gulf war live from their own homes from a 24 hours' cable network. Although this war was much advanced in terms of technological developments, production and distribution of war photographs were highly monitored by the state authorities due to the impacts war photography could create during the Vietnam war. The 2003 Iraq War marked the coming of age of internet in America,

as this was the first war followed by a mass audience/viewer all over the world through internet (Schwalbe 2006: 264). Like Dean Wright, the editor in chief of MSNB.com had predicted, Iraq war became known as the internet war later (Hewitt 2003: 4). Since this became one of the first US wars to be covered with high quality digital cameras, laptops, satellite phones and video phones with internet access, the new technologies facilitated the entire world to see the war zone and the happenings there through internet. Moreover, the embedding of media with the military apparently gave direct access for more photojournalists into the war field more than ever before. Later studies on the embedded mission show that the photographs and news reports produced by the embedded media did not produce an 'independent, unique information' about the war zone (Griffin 2004: 399). Even then, it contributed to the mass production of images from the war zone different from the photographs of 1991 Gulf war which was a show off of the technological advancement of the American military in their fight over Iraq (Griffin 2004: 395). Although internet played a very significant role in the production and distribution of war photographs during the Iraq war, not enough studies have been done on the role of internet and digital technologies in the making and spreading of the war images (Schwalbe 2006: 266).

Iraq War becomes a significant moment in the history of war photography because it marks the democratization of war photography in a new sense. From the firstly photographed Mexican-American war, war photography has been evolving into its newer forms over the time. Ever since the Crimean war, war photography was a realm of the professional photographers who had expertise with photographic techniques and professional cameras. These professionally created photographs had generated a market for itself ever since the Crimean war and this newly emerged market and the expectations of the middle-class customers had their influence on reshaping the whole idea of war that was created through photographs (Huppaufl 1993:133-134). By the mid of 20th century, war photography has evolved from its professional realms in

the 19th century to the hands of the masses. Anyone and everyone with the affordable film cameras could be a photographer. This revolution has resulted in the mass production of images from the battlefields reaching to the people via various mediums including the television. Years later, since the early days of 21st century, the coming of internet and digital camera made war photography a much more complicated arena with its democratization of photography in a newer sense. The medium of war photography became accessible to anyone with a camera. The number of amateur photographers along with professionals drastically increased. Anyone, including the soldiers started taking war photographs in their digital cameras and cell phones. This digital revolution also was facilitated by the instantaneous circulation and publication of these images across the world via internet. Traditionally, war photographs were used to either substantiate the state narratives or to develop protest or modern pacifism towards war. However, the digital revolution in the previous decade in fact complicated this purpose of war photography during the conflicts in the early years of twenty-first century because of the new idea of speed that these technologies made possible.

At the same time, this digital and internet revolution allowed multiple voices on the war to be heard because it facilitated anyone and everyone with a digital camera or cell phone to describe their reality of the war. This resulted in having new layers and narratives to the otherwise one-sided story of war itself. It also made the soldier narratives to be heard as well. Soldier photography as a new category takes its shape in this time (Kennedy 2009: 819). As a result, soldiers participating in the war becomes not only the actors of the war, but the spectators who document the war as well. Soldiers with cell phones or digital cameras who took photographs of the battlefield not only circulated it among themselves, but among their families and friends in the home country using internet facilities such as emails, blogs, photoblogs, flicker etc. Milblogging emerges as a new phenomenon during the Iraq war as a consequence of the technological advancements. Liam Kennedy in his 'Soldier Photography: Visualising the War

in Iraq' notes that 'the soldiers running around with digital cameras are the truly embedded photographers' (Kennedy 2009: 819). These amateur productions were in fact far less controlled and monitored by the state and military structures unlike the embedded professional productions. Therefore, the number of photographs of the war circulated via internet, televisions, newspapers and magazines were overwhelming during the Iraq war.

As the amount of image production increased, war photography as a category became more complex due to the questions and debates over the authenticity and accuracy of images as well as the larger political impact it could create on the viewers due to the immediacy with which new photographs were coming in. When the newspapers, magazines and television tried to project on a selected set of photographs from an overwhelming archive, these medias were trying to 'frame' the visual narrative of the war from a particular lens side-lining all other narratives and projections. The soldier photography which was out of strict government controls and censorship issues therefore becomes an alternative narrative to the official visual narratives provided by the state embedded photographers. It is in this context that this paper attempts to place the most scandalous Abu Ghraib photographs for analysis.

Abu Ghraib Photos in the Digital Era

Photographs of torture and atrocities from the war zones recorded by the soldiers were nothing new in the history ever since the invention of photography. These photographs of torture were taken for both personal as well as official purposes since the beginning. Even the most disturbing images from the Nazi camps including images of rape, abuse, mutilation of bodies, soldiers burying the dead bodies etc were covered and recorded in detail showing both the perpetrators and the victims clearly during the 2nd world war (Whitty 2010: 699). These visual records were done for various reasons such as to establish the racial supremacy of Germans over the Jews, as evidence to prove that the official orders were carried out, to scare the enemy

populations, to satisfy the sadistic pleasures etc. Photography was used as an integral part of humiliation ever since then. Although Abu Ghraib images come in the line of this history, it becomes much more complicated because of the coming of digital technologies in use. Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq became a notorious site in the initial months of the Iraq war itself as some of the most disturbing war photographs got produced from there (Mitchell 2011: 112). This set of torture photographs got aired and became public through CBS's 60Minutes II on April 28, 2004 even though they were produced and circulated in private circles much before. In the days that followed, some of these photographs were circulated widely across the world via internet and other medias from an overwhelming archive of torture photographs from Abu Ghraib. Photographs taken by soldiers in duty in Abu Ghraib using their digital cameras showed prisoners going through psychological, physical and sexual tortures. The number of photographs produced and the posing for the photographs suggests the very nature of photography in the digital era. The archive was so vast because of the digital camera in use that had no concerns of film wastage and other constraints of the film camera. As photographs function as an important factor in memory making, most of the photographs taken from Abu Ghraib also reflected this trend.

These photographs were circulated through both personal (memory making) and formal (evidence for the official duties being carried out) circles before it got released through television in 2004. However, the release of these photographs and the debates that followed shows that their truth value was never questioned. These photographs were seen as evidentiary in nature probably because of the horrifying acts they show. Susan Sontag's commentary after their release reflect this. She says that the photographer's intention does not determine the meaning of the photographs, because these photographs revealed a darker side of American invasion which was unacknowledged till then rather than just being a photograph of personal memory of the photographers and those are seen in them (Sontag 2003: 32). These torture

photographs were received in such a way that it exposed what has gone wrong with the system. At the same time, as Stanley Cohen comments in his book, 'States of Denial' that 'it would be wrong to assume that increased visibility and public knowledge of atrocities and suffering will provoke outrage or effective interventions; on the contrary, images of human rights abuses may work to further strategies of denial amongst both state and non-state actors' (qtd in Whitty 2010: 690). The debates following the release of Abu Ghraib torture photographs also shows a similar state intervention subsiding the political potential of photography.

Gender Visibility at the Abu Ghraib Archive

Iraq War has also begun at a significant period in history: a time when gender, particularly feminist scholarship, became an important topic of discussion in the academia all over the world. As Cynthia H Enloe points out in her book 'Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Senses of the Iraq War', during the years of the War, scholars were earning doctorates from the universities across Europe in women's studies (Enloe:2010). Many of the new scholars then chose gender dynamics in the war zones as their research topics. Moreover, during the war time, number of faculties who got appointed as chairs for women's studies and gender studies departments in many of the Asian countries also increased. This development in the academia got reflected in the war zone reporting as well. As a culmination of all these attempts, a good scholarship on militarisation and gender came up from different parts of the world. Active discussions on gender during the beginning of the war in academia and other social spheres has not only contributed in the development of a good amount of data production from a gendered perspective, but further it helped in the growth of a scholarship in terms of various individual books and articles in journals like International Feminist Journal of Politics, Politics and Gender, The European Journal of Women's Studies etc. A greater part of this scholarship has shed light on the gendered causes, processes and consequences of militarisation in the war zone (Enloe 2010:).

As photographs remained a major medium through which the so-called real picture of the war and war zones got revealed, they also played a very significant role in reshaping and representing the gender norms in the battle space. As Zarzycka observes 'war remains a highly gendered ideology where men's political, and social dominance has been framed as given the notions of war, citizenship, nationalism...' and most of the representations of these war zones just reiterated these established gender relations (Zarzycka 2017: 15). Even though Iraq war was happening at a time when gender related discussions were heard aloud, debates and dialogues that followed the release of the Abu Ghraib torture images were highly gendered in nature.

Zarzycka, in her analysis of the images of women in press imagery and imagery circulated by international NGOs to document the destruction of war, observes that since 'women's bodies and faces travel across geopolitical contexts and emerging technologies, they play a significant role in swaying the public opinions and public action on the armed conflicts and peacebuilding operations' (Zarzycka 2017: 4). In most of these images, the conventions of war tropes remained unaltered. Further, Zarzycka notes that the photographic trope, usually 'taken to be an index of the concrete historical event, is based on normative set of generic concepts-mother, sister, lover, love, life, death- that sustain a dominant representational paradigm, often based on sentimentality and its pleasure' (Zarzycka 2017: 8). The photographic representation of the soldiers Pfc. Jessica Lynch, Pfc. Lynndie England and Sabrina Herman and the discussions followed by these visual representations very much retained the dominant representational paradigms through which women were getting represented from the beginning onwards.

It was Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman who were made the iconic figures of Abu Ghraib torture photographs. England was seen in thumbs up position, smiling, with Cpl Charles Graner behind a pyramid of naked human bodies of the Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in one of the iconic images. In another, she was seen holding a leash tied around the neck of a detainee

who is lying on the ground. Sabrina Herman, the other woman soldier who became infamous, was seen in a thumbs up position, smiling and posing for a photo near the dead body of an Iraqi detainee in the prison. Even though, there were many such photographs produced by the soldiers from Abu Ghraib, it was the images of these women that were seen and created discussions after the release of these photographs. The entire Abu Ghraib scandal was given a gendered colour to it. Gender in the photographs invited and created much louder discussion and shock on the women's involvement than what is being shown in the photographs or the fact that photography itself was made to participate in this torture. One of the popular opinions was that the women in the photographs are in a powerful position because of the power dynamics of the war, but were seen as incapable of handling it. The publication of the photographs of England at Abu Ghraib was perceived as a moral shock to the American public because it was something unexpected of her gender. In the debates that followed, England's femininity was brought into question and argued that she was a 'Lynch gone wrong', a ruined woman by highlighting her cropped hair, her relationship with Graner and pregnancy out of the wedlock etc (Lobasz 2008: 306,307). Kelly Oliver notes in the 'Introduction' to *Women as 'Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and Media'* that although women soldiers' that death in Iraq gets very little attention in the media, but 'women's involvement in abusive treatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib... continues to haunt the American sentiments towards the war' (Oliver 2007: 1-2).

Following debates after the release of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs show that when women in the photographs were received with shock, men in the photographs and behind camera were seen as deviant individual behaviours. While the Abu Ghraib photos appeared on television President George W Bush commented that 'we will learn all the facts and determine the full extent of these abuses. Those involved will be identified. They will answer for their actions' (qtd in Filkins: May 9, 2004). This kind of a gender prism for the women soldiers

involved in the torture photographs was meticulously created by the mass media of the time. It is through the speed with which a story repeatedly travels over the internet and other digital devices that this gender narrative to the Abu Ghraib archive was made. Moreover, due to the lack of repetitiveness, which is very essential for anything to be visible in the digital world, the vastness of the Abu Ghraib archive remained unseen by most of the world. Although it apparently contained images of rape of women and children, sexual assault by animals, death etc, none of the individual photographs could raise heated arguments and discussions.

Though the acts in the released photographs were shocking and horrifying, only the evils humans are capable of doing it came into discussion, when the larger structure that made this act and photographs possible remained unchallenged. Moreover, due to the very momentary nature of the digital, such questions and discussions were never heard even during the next presidential elections that happened soon after its publication (Mirzoeff 2006: 38).

Conclusion

A study of the most scandalous Abu Ghraib photographs suggests that the new media technologies such as digital cameras, mobile phones and the internet has complicated the visual arena of war and war photography. On the one hand, there has been a proliferation in the amount of image production and its fast circulation through immediate formal and personal circles generating a new understanding of the modern war itself, on the other hand, its visibility is very much short lived because of the momentary relevance of data in a digital world due to its fastness and momentum. In addition to that, Abu Ghraib images were very much controlled by the propaganda and policies of the state in such a way that most of the torture photographs become invisible from the public visual spaces and internet now. Also, those photographs which are made available for public gaze and to trigger memory of this scandalous past have undergone a larger discourse of denial by the state by putting the whole responsibility solely

on the individuals who were visible as part of these abusive acts through photographs. In a digital world where thousands of photographs get produced, circulated, seen and deleted or removed simultaneously, Abu Ghraib photographs suggests that the new technology has complicated the realm of war that is seen through photography.

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