

(Re-)Formatting Life: Images of Torture from the Abu Ghraib Prison and the Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp

Rebecca Natascha Boguska / Ph.D. Thesis Project¹ M. A.,
Goethe Universität Frankfurt-am-Main

In the beginning of 2002, Navy Petty Officer Shane T. McCoy, who had been assigned to Combat Camera, an elite unit specializing in '[t]he acquisition and utilization of still and motion imagery in support of combat, information, humanitarian, special force, intelligence, reconnaissance, engineering, legal, public affairs, and other operations involving the Military Services',² shot a series of photographs depicting the arrival of the first detainees at Camp X-Ray in the Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp [GTMO]. The most prominent image, which will be well-known to many readers, is a high-angle shot depicting the detainees in orange jumpsuits and headgear kneeling in a yard surrounded by mesh and barbed wire.

The men's gloved hands are tied together in front of them, restricting their movements. Their mouths are covered by masks, presumably to protect military personnel from contagion, a detail which simultaneously defines the detainees' bodies as abnormal and potentially dangerous. Moreover, the covering of the detainees' mouths points to the restriction of speech; the denial of formulating a request; the impossibility of complaining about how they are being treated. The detainees also wear blackened goggles and ear protectors, the former making it impossible for them to see what is happening to them and around them, the latter completely muting any sound produced around them. All these accessories are meant to discourage, confuse, and strip them of any remaining agency.³

¹ Ph.D. Thesis supervised by Professor Dr. Vinzenz Hediger and Professor Dr. Juliane Rebentisch. For more information: boguska@em.uni-frankfurt.de

² Department of Defense, 'SUBJECT: Joint Combat Camera (COMCAM) Program', p. 2, <https://biotech.law.lsu.edu/blaw/dodd/corres/pdf/d50404_081302/d50404p.pdf> [accessed 2 October 2018].

³ Couple of days after the publishing of McCoy's photograph, Donald Rumsfeld explained in a Department of Defense News Briefing that some of these accessories were actually used for the detainees' and soldiers' protection. See Donald Rumsfeld, 'Transcript: DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Pace. Presenter: Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld January 22, 2002', <<http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2254>> [accessed 2 October 2018].

The camera observes and shoots this scene from above.⁴ Seeming to float in the air, it manages to capture not only the detainees and the military personnel ‘processing’ the detainees inside the cage and the detainees and military personnel observing the situation from the outside, but also the entire architecture in which this scene is taking place. The visual record of the location appears to be of equal importance to the depicted situation. On the one hand, it defines the potential interactions among the detainees as well as between the soldiers and the prisoners. On the other hand, the architecture becomes a structuring element of the photograph itself, influencing to a great degree the viewer’s perception of the depicted situation. Moreover, the barbwire is a very prominent element of the photograph, it is positioned in the image’s foreground, cutting the represented scene into smaller entities. Due to the perceived proximity of the wire to the viewer’s eye, we, like the detainees, seem to be threatened by it. The silver, shiny, sharp razor wire seemingly endangers our eye and gaze and prompts us to look away.

This image, and the challenge it presents to the viewer, anticipates what was to come with regard to the visual images from GTMO.⁵ On one hand, the photograph renders visible the ways the recognition⁶ of the detainees had been intentionally denied. On the other, it prefigured and contributed to the U.S. Government’s decision to introduce an institutionalized restraint in accessing visual images from GTMO. The restraint in accessing visual images and the strict procedures at GTMO raise questions about whether and in what manner these restrictions might be understood as mediated structural conditions facilitating the ‘forgetfulness of recognition’⁷ or the denial of recognition. Another question arising from this photograph is how actual forms of mediation, of making objects and subjects visible — for example the torture photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison — do not participate in the act of recognition, but rather support the process of reification.

One of the central claims of this project is that the tortured detainee is

⁴ In an interview McCoy said that he had put the digital camera on a stick and used a timer — the snapshot was seemingly taken without his involvement as an author, see Carol Rosenberg, ‘Photos Echo Years Later’, <<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/guantanamo/article1928720.html>> [accessed 4 December 2018].

⁵ One can argue that another challenge for the spectator is that the viewer perspective coincides with the perspective of the soldiers, a view that the spectator might not be willing to take.

⁶ In my PhD thesis I base the understanding of the term ‘recognition’ on Axel Honneth’s distinction between ‘cognition’ and ‘recognition’: ‘While by cognizing a person we mean an identification of him as an individual that can gradually be improved upon, by “recognizing” we refer to the expressive act through which this cognition is conferred with the positive meaning of an affirmation. In contrast to cognizing, which is a non-public, cognitive act, recognizing is dependent on media that express the fact that the other person is supposed to possess social “validity”.’ See Axel Honneth, ‘Invisibility: On the Epistemology of “Recognition”’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 75 (2001), 111–126 (p. 115).

⁷ See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

(Re-)Formatting Life: Images of Torture from the Abu Ghraib Prison

reduced to an existential minimum not only by the act of torture, but through its inscription in military records, as well as through the practices of image production, distribution and perception. Together, these factors limit his social possibilities, undo human agency, and seemingly format the apprehension of the affected person as a reified entity. Hence, the process of (re-)formation initiated by the analysed practices, documents and images in some cases result in both the tortured person's life not being apprehended as a life in the full sense and the tortured person being perceived as '[...] a living figure outside the norms of life [...]'.⁸ At the same time, these practices, documents and images can also encourage exactly the opposite; they might provide the spectator with a ground for recognizing the detainee. Hence, some of the media objects that had been produced at GTMO — for instance McCoy's photograph — and Abu Ghraib seem to be marked by a potential of shifting the spectators' perception in both directions. Whereas the 'frames' in which these media objects (re-) appear are highly relevant to these shifts of perception towards recognition or its forgetfulness.

In order to discuss the role of visual media in processes of recognition and in processes of reification understood as forgetfulness or denial of recognition with regards to the perception of the tortured men at GTMO and Abu Ghraib, the project analyses three interdependent bodies of material.

Firstly, it considers various documents e.g. legal memoranda which have contributed to the definition of torture within the George W. Bush administration. Furthermore, to cast light on how photographs from Abu Ghraib and their manner of publishing have been discussed within the U.S. Federal Court System, the project investigates the outcome of the lawsuit 'American Civil Liberties Union, et al., Plaintiffs v. Department of Defense, et al., Defendants'.⁹ With regards to the production of images at GTMO, the project considers the regulation of this production by means of other 'administrative' and military procedures codified in documents such as the 'Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures'.¹⁰

Secondly, the visual representations of torture from the Abu Ghraib prison and the Guantánamo Bay detention camp will be contrasted with juridical and journalistic discourses about these images. Therefore, this second level of analysis will concern not only the images themselves but also their press coverage. On this level the relationship between the juridical definition of torture and the nature of torture images, their production, distribution and perception, will be explored.

Thirdly, questions regarding the possibility of filmic activism towards these dominant representational schemes in the torture photographs will be discussed.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London/New York: Verso, 2010), p. 8.

⁹ Alvin K. Hellerstein, 'American Civil Liberties Union, et al., Plaintiffs – against – Department of Defense, et al., Defendants', <<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/new-york/nysdc/e/1:2004cv04151/249459/582/>> [accessed 2 October 2018].

¹⁰ Joint Task Force Guantanamo, 'Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)', <<https://file.wikileaks.org/file/gitmo-sop.pdf>> [accessed 2 October 2018].

Rebecca Natascha Boguska

Some films have reflected on and counteracted against these schemes with a considerable reappraisal of the stories of the victims and the production circumstances of the photographs themselves. These efforts are to some degree influenced by the idea of dismantling the consequences of the reification process. Through the politically saturated filmic operations of reconstructing biographical information or of re-contextualizing diverse material, the apprehension of a life that has been lost or injured might be restored and the viewer will, to some extent, receive a revision of the discursive environment of the image.