The Abu Ghraib Photographs and the Gaze –
Tools of Power, Violence, and Oppression

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1. Introduction

In January 2004, by leaking several photographs to the U.S. Army’s Criminal Investigation Command (CID), Joseph Darby, a Sergeant at Abu Ghraib Prison, first exposed the abuse that had been ongoing at the American detention facility in Iraq. The photographs, a majority of which were taken between October and December 2003, provide a snapshot of the systematic torture the United States committed during the war in Iraq. Initially shocking the public, the images triggered a variety of responses and interpretations some of which were critical and accusing, others, however, rather apologetic (Dauphinee 144). Detached from the photographers’ intentions, the images developed a life of their own: as legal evidence, as artwork and documentary imagery, and as iconic representations of the war on terror (Butler 956 + 964). On the one hand, some scholars, like Dora Apel, have argued that “rendering the images visible to the public begins their undoing [and] contributes to the resistance against the acts they represent” (96). On the other hand, some critics, such as Assistant Professor of Sociology Michelle Brown, have pointed out that the photographs’ circulation in the media has contributed to the reproduction of suffering and, in doing so, has held the involved military personnel, as well as the public, jointly responsible for the oppression of the Iraqi detainees (137 + 152). Indeed, the detainees at Abu Ghraib – subject to the cameras’, photographers’, torturers’, and the public’s gaze – were caught up in a system of power and subordination. Recognizing this critical condition provokes the following pressing question: How did the multiplicity of gazes enabled through the Abu Ghraib torture photographs reflect and even facilitate the power relations between the various spectators and the Iraqi detainees? The imbalance of power and prevalence of oppression at Abu Ghraib were emphasized and enforced through the interplay of a variety of gazes that marked the Iraqis as ‘other’. At the same time, they were rendered powerless because of their inability to return the gendered, sexist, orientalist, and racist gaze of their oppressors. Correspondingly, Stephen Eisenman argued that “[t]he torture photographs from Abu Ghraib enshrine objectification and heteronomous thought: the idea that certain people by virtue of race, religion, nationality, gender or sexual preference may be denied rights to basic freedoms … and used as mere (disposable) means to an end” (14). This could be a reason why, the images, by illustrating and replicating the visual and physical abuse, serve as powerful tools of violence and torture in America’s war against terror and the subjugation of Iraqi prisoners.

In the following, this paper will provide an overview of the events at Abu Ghraib Prison. It will also offer a description and analysis of a select number of torture photographs and their
polyvalent perception through scholars, the media, and the public. A definition of “the gaze” will help to situate the images and their analysis within a gendered, sexist, orientalist, and racist system of power. Accordingly, the main part of this paper will outline and interrelate the various forms and aspects of the gaze and the oppressive relationships it enables. The latter can be discerned in the Abu Ghraib torture photographs as well as within the circumstances under which they were taken and distributed. This approach attempts to neither favor a singular spectator or interpretation nor the presumed intentions of the photographers who claimed to have taken the photographs in order to reveal the truth about the ongoing abuse. Instead, this paper strives to take into account a variety of perspectives and contexts that have informed the images and the visual, hierarchical relationships they facilitate. As a result, it demonstrates how a variety of complex spectating situations – captured and implemented by the photographs – functioned to distinguish the Iraqi detainees as different and of less value than their Western oppressors.

2. Abu Ghraib, Torture Photographs, and the Gaze

First, in order to grasp the impact of and analyze the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, it is important to contextualize the images: What happened at Abu Ghraib Prison? Under which circumstances were the photographs taken? How was the scandal received by the U.S. public? In 2003, approximately twenty miles west of Baghdad, Iraq, the Abu Ghraib prison was adapted for U.S. military purposes. Some experts claim that, at times, as many as fifty thousand detainees – Iraqi men, women, and even children – were held at Abu Ghraib (Hersh). The detention facility was an important strongpoint in America’s ongoing war against terror that had been initiated in Afghanistan in 2001 and continued in Iraq two years later (Hersh). Ironically, the prison – at which not only Army regulations, but also the Geneva Conventions were frequently infringed – was widely propagated as a bulwark of American freedom. Yet, the photographic evidence stood “in stark contrast to the officially approved and sanitized representations of the American presence in Iraq” (Apel 98). Over the course of several months in late 2003 – on about twelve separate days and on approximately twenty-six distinct occasions (Gourevitch and Morris 266) – an estimated 1325 photographs that are not in the least representative of the total sum of abusive acts and incidents of torture were taken (Butler 964). A majority of the images were captured by the cameras of Specialist Charles Graner, Specialist Sabrina Harman, and Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick who had also distributed the images to family and friends (Gourevitch and Morris 264). After the publication of the images in the media, the three photographers, along with four other suspects, were held accountable for
“conspiracy, dereliction of duty, cruelty toward prisoners, maltreatment, assault, and indecent acts” (Hersh).

All in all, the photographs triggered a variety of responses and, due to their perception in a multiplicity of contexts and communities, attempts at determining their meaning were seldom influenced by the photographers’ intentions (Benson-Allot 40; Sontag, “Regarding” 39). While the Army’s initial response was an endeavor to contain the affair, many people were initially shocked when first confronted with the images and the events at Abu Ghraib. In contrast, some politicians seemed to be more irritated by the leakage of the images than what they depicted (Sontag, “What”). Certainly, the torture photographs had made the war more “real” not only to military personnel and politicians, but also to the public (Sontag, “Regarding” 104). Yet, the images did not majorly influence the 2004 Presidential campaign. Instead, some critics, such as Stephen Eisenman, even proposed that many U.S. citizens were not significantly shocked by the exposure of the U.S. abuse in Iraq (8). In his book, Eisenman calls this the ‘Abu Ghraib Effect’ and criticizes that the “US public and the amateur photographers at Abu Ghraib share a kind of moral blindness … that allows them to ignore, or even to justify, however partially or provisionally, the facts of degradation and brutality manifest in the pictures” (9). With this statement, Eisenman established a link between the photographer-spectator and the spectator at home and further stressed that, regardless of the photographers’ claim that they intended to “prove that the U.S. is not what [some people] think” (qtd. in Gourevitch and Morris 112), both partook in and authored the visual torture of the Iraqi detainees (Brown 21). Ultimately, most spectators – at Abu Ghraib and in the U.S. – are caught up in the power relations established through gazing at the abused detainees and the pictures of their torture. As Susan Sontag argues in Regarding the Pain of Others, regardless of one’s intentions when looking at images of pain and violence most “of us [do not have the right to look and as a result] are voyeurs, whether or not we meant to be” (42).

Capturing the guards’ and the publics’ voyeuristic gaze by “call[ing] upon the viewers to look (“Look!”)” (Möller 34), the Abu Ghraib images have become iconic. Some scholars even claim that a select few of the photographs have been instituted as “a logo for the war itself” (Apel 97) and have contributed to create a master narrative of the U.S. presence in Iraq. In their book Standard Operating Procedure, Gourevitch and Morris provide a detailed overview of the events at Abu Ghraib Prison and a thorough description of the photographs:
Most of these pictures show solitary naked prisoners in stress positions, cuffed to the bars of their cells, or stretched and bent forward and backward over bunk beds, with their hands bound to the far railings. Some of the prisoners are hooded with sandbags, some with underpants. … Several photographs show a row of prisoners in orange jumpsuits doing push-ups in the hallway, and in one Sergeant Frederick can be made out, standing in the background. … The pictures have a stark discomfort to them, a sense of silence and an absence of any discernible attitude, which gives them the quality of stolen glimpses of men rendered into hellish statuary.

(107)

In Standard Operating Procedure, as well as in the film of the same name, the two authors provide a painful, graphic survey of the abuse at Abu Ghraib. Some of the most widely known and pithy photographs that were published, for instance, by newspapers such as The New York Times or The Guardian, serve as visual evidence in this paper.

The torture photographs provide a selective impression of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs; yet, they are by no means representative of all the incidents that happened nor all the photographs that were taken at this Army facility. In two of the rather prominent Abu Ghraib torture pictures, for instance, an inanimate body in a black body bag is lying on the floor (Picture 1 + 2) ¹. Charles Graner and Sabrina Harman can be seen in their uniforms, wearing green latex gloves, kneeling next to the body. They are smiling and offering a thumbs up for the camera. A photograph of another incident shows Harman and Graner, again grinning and holding their thumbs up, posing behind a pile of hooded but otherwise naked detainees (Picture 3). The seven men are arranged in a pyramid-like formation on the floor. Their naked rear ends are fully exposed and only censored through a slight pixilation. In another picture of the same incident that seems to have been taken from a different perspective, another U.S. Army guard (whose identity I have not been able to discern) can be seen – camera in hand, possibly taking the picture of Harman and Graner (Picture 4). From this viewpoint, the heads of the naked detainees are facing the camera; yet, their faces are covered and their identities remain unclear. All seven are hooded with what seem to be plastic bags; their disguise reminds of one of Abu Ghraib scandal’s most emblematic images: the “Vietnam” (Picture 5). Standing on a wooden box, the hooded detainee in this iconic image has wires attached to his hands.

According to Apel, the man, Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, who is wearing a dark hood and guise, was threatened by Specialist Sabrina Harman (who is not depicted in this particular shot of the situation) that “he would be electrocuted if he fell of the box” (91). In addition, what cannot be seen in this photograph but has been stated by Faleh is that the wires were not only attached to his hands, but additionally to his toes and his penis (91). In her article “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib”, Apel further discusses a second prominent photograph that has been extensively circulated in the media and, according to Puar, has come to be known as “Lynndie the Leasher” or “pussy whipping” (Picture 6) (Puar 20). This photograph depicts Private Lynndie England, wearing short hair and her uniform, holding a leash that is attached to the neck of a naked Iraqi man on the ground (Apel 91). In contrast to the “Vietnam” photograph, the face of the detainee in this picture is not covered by a hood and can clearly be discerned by the viewer and by England who is also looking at him.

However, in “Lynndie the Leasher”, England is not just looking at the naked detainee on the ground; for, according to art historian and critic James Elkins, “‘just looking’ is a lie. [Instead, one is] always looking out, looking for, even just looking around” (21). Furthermore, Elkins claims that looking, no matter how mild or weightless, is always “directed” and cannot be performed without, to some extent, thinking about possessing the object of one’s look (22). This appetite that is inherent to looking is also known as the gaze (22).² The Abu Ghraib torture photographs capture this gaze and make evident the power relations in which the viewers are caught up. At several points in their groundbreaking work on visual culture, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain the concept of the gaze:

The gaze, whether institutional or individual, thus helps to establish relationships of power. The act of looking is commonly regarded as awarding more power to the person who is looking than to the person who is the object of the look. (111)

They further state that:

The gaze is a term used to describe the relationship of looking in which the subject is caught up in dynamics of desire through trajectories of looking and being looked at among objects and other people … A gaze is not exactly something one performs … rather, it is a relation in which one is caught up. (442)

² It is important to note that, as Lacan has posited, the gaze “(associated with the phallus)” should not be confused with the look (“associated with the eye”) (Evans and Gamman 16).
Being caught up in this relation of the gaze and these “dynamics of desire” that Sturken and Cartwright mention, the spectator is trapped in the structures of the power relations. Multiple gazes inform the intricacy of the interactions, for the gaze is rarely singular and the power structures between the spectator(s) and the object of their gaze are often complex. Sturken and Cartwright also claim that the gaze, enabled through representation in photographs, often serves to reinforce systems of power by constituting difference and defining the objects of the gaze as ‘other’ (106). This is also how the gaze functions at Abu Ghraib Prison. While often unnoticed the spectating crowd – prisoners, torturers, photographers, the media, and even the public viewers – was constantly caught up in this system of power that is enabled through the gaze. By establishing difference, this system further created a hierarchical, oppressive relationship between the detainees, who were subjected to the voyeuristic gaze, and the spectators. Michel Foucault has defined the voyeur’s gaze as “an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he [she] is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against him [her] self. [This is a] superb formula: power exercised continuously” (qtd. in Denzin 1). As a result, even when the gaze of the voyeuristic spectators was not apparent, the Iraqi detainees might have constantly felt its oppression and control over their bodies.

Furthermore, by actively being involved in the (re)production of pain and suffering, the ‘penal spectator’, when caught up in the relations of power and of looking, engages in acts of violence (Benson-Allott 41). For, ingrained in the system of power and war, visual hierarchies and forms of oppression have instituted the concept of sight as a weapon of violence and torture (Brothers 1). As Susan Sontag has argued, “‘shooting’ a subject [with a camera like] shooting a human being [with a gun]” has rendered photography an integral element of war (“Regarding” 66). Producing and reproducing images of abuse has ultimately made the Abu Ghraib torture photographs available for spectatorship. Through photography, this spectatorship has become integral to the acts committed at Abu Ghraib. Consequently, power was exercised through the gaze and the images that capture this relation functioned as a tool of oppression and torture. In charge of supervising the Iraqi detainees, the guards at Abu Ghraib enabled a voyeuristic relationship between themselves and the prisoners who, in return, remained constantly apprehended in this oppressive systems of oversight. However, not only the guards – as

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3 Norman Denzin, in *The cinematic Society*, offers a similar viewpoint when describing the voyeur’s gaze and stating that it invokes ‘the other’. He further states that “the gaze is structurally empowering … producing an embodied impression which defines [the object’s] fleeting subjectivity in the situation” (Denzin 46).
torturers, bystanders, or photographers – but also their friends, families, and the public at home were caught in the role of spectator and the power relations enforced through the gaze. Entrapped in this system of power through looking at the abuse and the photographs thereof, the voyeuristic spectators might tend to identify with both, the victims of abuse and their torturers alike. According to Carrie Rentschler, when assuming the victim’s identity and “claim[ing] their own sense of injury”, they render themselves unaccountable for the violence they witness and enable (301). In doing so, the spectator contributes to the establishment of hierarchical relationship and condones the oppression of the Iraqi detainees. However, according to Apel, the spectator might also sympathize with the torturer-photographer and, as mentioned above, assume a dominating position; thus, he or she partakes in the violence and subjugation of the detainees (89). As a result of this identification with the photographing torturer, the spectator is cast in the role of oppressor.

Eventually, the torture of the victims becomes a spectacle for both, the Army guards at Abu Ghraib and the civilian viewers of the images. In fact, Joseph Pugliese argues that “[i]n the Abu Ghraib images, the smirking agents of torture must be seen as metonymically inscribing the spectating locus of a larger white American public that will also consume the photos in terms of spectacle and entertainment” (Pugliese 262). In general, several scholars have argued that watching war, violence, and abuse has increasingly been perceived as delightful and pleasing by many, often Western, spectators (Kottler 29, Sontag 110). Michelle Brown has even argued that “beautiful suffering” is intended for the spectators’ pleasure and perceived as refined and aesthetically appealing (137). In Gourevitch’s and Morris’ book Standard Operating Procedure, Specialist Sabrina Harman serves as an example of the spectator’s fascination with pain and atrocity. Gourevitch and Morris claim that Harman admitted to being intrigued by looking at violence and the injured or lifeless bodies of the detainees (74). Harman functions as a primary example for the fact that watching other people suffer is often a form of entertainment for the spectator. This spectator derives pleasure from looking at violence and bodies in pain and establishes himself in a position of dominance and power. Jeffrey Kottler’s book The Lust for Blood: Why We Are Fascinated by Death, Murder, Horror, and Violence deals with this fascination and Kottler claims that “[a]nything goes for the sake of entertainment” (197). Taking pleasure in looking – whether to dominate the object of one’s gaze or with the intent of “sexual stimulation through sight” – is what feminist film
theorist Laura Mulvey has explained as “scopophilia” (16-18). According to her, the voyeur derives pleasure by controlling others, objectifying them, and subjecting them to their gaze (16). The gaze, then, even when directed at acts of violence, often evolves around desire. Being entangled in these relationships of gazing, the spectators of abuse and of the torture photographs from Abu Ghraib seem to take pleasure in looking at the nude, injured, and violated bodies of the Iraqi detainees. Puar even asserts that “those orchestrating these acts, several of whom appear erotically riled in the Abu Ghraib photographs, are part of, not external to, the torture scenes themselves, sometimes even explicitly so” (29). Consequently, the voyeurs’ scopophilic gaze renders the prisoners as ‘other’ and subject of the spectators’ entertainment. This voyeuristic gaze that objectifies the detainees as focus of the voyeur’s desire is the focal point of the following section.

3. Pleasure of Looking, Sexuality, and Abuse

One author who points to the objectification of the Iraqi detainees through the voyeuristic gaze is Joseph Pugliese. In his article “Abu Ghraib and Its Shadow Archives”, Pugliese claims that “the victim is … compelled to experience the very objectification of their tortured body as a type of visual commodity put to use for the gratification of the torturers and their fellow spectators” (260). Capturing the victims as visual commodity, the Abu Ghraib photographs function as evidence of the sexual assault and humiliation committed by the Army’s personnel in Abu Ghraib. At the same time, some critics also suggests that the pictures, taken for personal pleasure, have been fetishized through their circulation among members of the military and the public (251). Elizabeth Dauphinee stresses this by pointing out that the redistribution of the images has contributed to the fetishization of suffering, violence, and pain (140). Denigrated through visual commodification and fetishized object of desire, the Iraqis had to endure physical exposure to pain and visual exposure to the oppressive gaze of the spectators. Through the hypervisibility of the naked, humiliated Iraqi bodies and the graphic images taken at Abu Ghraib, the act of looking at the victims of abuse seems dominated by the spectators’ sexual desire and longing for dominance. One detainee, Nori Al-Yassari, commented on the voyeuristic aspect of the torture by stating that “prison guards ordered us to hold our penises and stroke it [sic] … They started to take photographs as if it was a porn

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4 For more information on scopophilia, see Sturken and Cartwright. In their definition of scopophilia they reference Freud who identified scopophilia as “the drive to look and the general pleasure in looking. Freud saw voyeurism (the pleasure in looking without being seen) and exhibitionism (The pleasure in being looked at) as the active and passive forms of scopophilia.” (Sturken and Cartwright 459)
movie” (Dauphinee 147). Al-Yassari raises awareness for the pornographic gaze that dominated the sexual abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib. Comparing the photographers to directors of porn movies and emphasizing the significance of photography for the torturers’ dominance, Al-Yassari shows that the camera functioned as a tool for sexual pleasure. In dealing with the imagery of the Abu Ghraib prison in her essay “Torture and the Ethics of Photographs”, Judith Butler also claims:

If the pleasure is in the seeing, and the pleasure is taken in the suffering depicted, the torture is the effect of the camera, and the … pornographic gaze, is the cause of the scene of suffering itself; in effect, the camera becomes the torturer. (962)

This pornographic, dominating gaze casts the Iraqi prisoners as the object of the spectators’ control, fantasies, and arousal.

The notion of images of war as pornographic is emphasized by the fact that many of the images seem staged. Like props in a theatrical production, the detainees are arranged for and presented to the camera. This is especially evident in the images that depict the Iraqi men piled into a pyramid of human flesh. The theatricality of these pornographic images is emphasized by the poses the guards, such as Harman and Graner, strike for the camera. They are not only the authors of the pornographic imagery produced at Abu Ghraib, but also actors on the stage they have created to enact their dominance. Gourevitch and Morris even claim that “the staging was part of the reality [the photographs] documented” (263). Following orders like a script, the detainees are forced to engage in sexual acts by themselves or with one another. They are also physically abused and visually exposed to the pornographic gaze of their captors. The nudity in many images, such as the photograph mentioned above, emphasizes that the Iraqis are subject to the guards’ will and to their voyeuristic gaze. Even the images in which the bodies of the Iraqis and especially their genitals are not fully exposed still speaks to this form of oppression and objectification. For, as Norman Denzin argues, “the gaze … renders the other interactionally naked” and defenseless (50). Another example of this physical domination and objectification through a pornographic, sexualized, and exposing gaze is the image of “Lynndie the Leasher”. Through the gazes of the photographer-spectator and Lynndie England who can be seen looking down at the detainee. England’s gaze literally is imposed on the Iraqi prisoner from above, for England is standing over him. She dominates not only the prisoner but also the situation and the photograph that render he curled up Iraqi dually oppressed. Gourevitch and Morris even assert that there seems to be no better way to subjugate “an Arab … than to strip
him, tie him up, and have a “female bystander,” [look down at and] … laugh at him” (113). In addition, being suppressed by a white, American woman⁵ – in a photograph that stages sexual abuse for the camera and thereby enables a pornographic gaze – was thus a form of dominance that seemed to have been aimed at robbing the Iraqi man of his masculinity.

Posing a male detainee as dominated by a white woman is one aspect of the feminization of Iraqi men that was ongoing at Abu Ghraib and served as a tool in establishing Western (male) dominance in Iraq. Additionally to forcing the male detainee into a submissive position, the guards at Abu Ghraib made the Iraqi men wear women’s panties on their heads, take the receptive role in homosexual acts, and expose their naked bodies to the gaze of the bystanders. Moreover, through circulation of the photographs taken during these instances, people all around the world become voyeurs of the Iraqis’ sexual humiliation. These acts constitute the oppressors’ attempt at dominating the detainees. Jasbir K. Puar even argues that, in order to subjugate the male Arab prisoners, the American men (and women) strove to feminize the objects of their gaze. She states:

It is precisely … the masculinity of the terrorist … that threatens to reproduce itself. … I would argue that it is precisely feminizing … and the consequent insistence of mutually exclusive positions of masculine and feminine, that strips the tortured male body of its national-normative sexuality. This feminizing divests the male body of its virility. (27)

Robbing the Iraqi men at Abu Ghraib of their masculinity by pressuring them into submissive roles, the torturers counter the presumed threat the masculinity of the ‘other’ poses to their power and dominance at the prison and within the social, political, and cultural structures of the war on terror. Rendering the detainees defenseless and impotent, the abuse, as well as the images taken of it, “fetishizes and feminizes the sexuality of subjects as a strategy of domination, invoking as well the broader framework of hard-core pornography” (Brown 149). Feminization, fetishization, and subjugation to a pornographic gaze thus function to reduce the anxieties of the guards when confronted with the suspected terrorists and their masculinity.

⁵ While the objectification of the Iraqi detainees constitutes the main focus of this paper it is worthwhile mentioning that some scholars such as Puar and Brown have also pointed to the objectification of women through “their participation across the photos” (Brown 150). These scholars even go so far as to claim that the female military personnel in the images (especially Lynndie England) is cast in the role of dominatrix and subjected to a misogynist, male gaze. Puar stresses the dual role of the women as oppressors and oppressed: “the economy of violence produces a circulation whereby no woman is strictly an insider or an outsider. Rather, women can be subjects of violence but also agents of it, whether it is produced on their behalf or perpetuated directly by them” (21).
Additionally, the American military personnel at Abu Ghraib secured their dominance by objectifying the Iraqi men and subjugating them to their control and power.

Especially the enforcement and recording of homosexual acts, in which many of the detainees were forced to assume a submissive role, functioned to oppress and shame the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. At the U.S. military facility, male Iraqis were forced to take the receptive role in homosexual acts with other men, were pressured to masturbate and expose their genitals in front of male as well as female onlookers, and were denigrated and sexually abused by some of the American guards. Pressuring them to cross Muslim cultural and sexual taboos, such as being seen naked by others or engaging in homosexual, submissive (and thus feminizing) activities, constituted a means of oppressing and humiliating the Muslim men (Gourevitch and Morris 153). While the images of torture lend themselves to interpretations that center on the sexual abuse that the detainees had to bear and the voyeuristic, pornographic gaze of the spectator, one should not disregard the racism and orientalist ways of seeing that structure the power relations within as well as surrounding these images. In fact, they have dominated the guards’ assumptions about the conservative sexuality of the Iraqis. Why, for instance, Davis wonders, would a Muslim man react any differently than a non-Muslim man when being sexually and physically humiliated by a female guard (qtd. in Pugliese 256)? The superficial cultural assumptions that dominate the mindsets of the torturers and even some critics are not only banal, but also racist (256).

In contrast, in his analysis of the documentation of the instances of homosexual activity, Eisenman claims that “the photographs, however, stage and record two kinds of desire: first, the supposed, perverse desires of Islamic detainees; and second, the actual, un-repressed desires of the US prison guards” (101). Stereotyping the detainees as sexually abnormal, the prison guards appear to enact the detainees’ presumed perversity while simultaneously trying to hide their own desires behind their role as spectator. The American spectators’ contradictory perception of the Iraqis’ sexuality, reflects their orientalist and racist mindsets. By paradoxically “mark[ing] him [the detainee] both as sexually conservative, modest, and fearful of nudity … as well as queer, animalistic, barbarian, and unable to control his … urges” (Puar 18), the spectating situation is repetitive of oriental and racist stereotypes. In fact, this definition of the Iraqis’ sexuality is incongruent because it represents two contrasting ideas and locates them both within the identity of the Eastern ‘other’. Attempting to avert from their own fascination in observing the sexual acts they are forcing upon their victims, the military personnel involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal brought into focus the shame, humiliation, and
oppression of the Iraqi men instead. In marking the men as perverse and ‘other’ and enabling a voyeuristic gaze through photographing of the homosexual acts, the guards strove to justify their own desire and oppressive violence directed at the detainees (101). In his work, Joseph Pugliese sums this up:

[S]exual practices (sodomy) and sexualities (homosexuality) that challenge regimes of heteronormativity are violently transcoded as “aberrant” and “perverse” and are thus absorbed into a hetero-fascist eroticisation and aestheticisation of torture that targets the homosexual, the cross-dresser, the feminized Oriental male, and so on. (268-269)

Notably, by making the Iraqi men available to a sexualized, male gaze, the American guards established their power and dominance over them, and their gaze ultimately functioned as a tool of oppression and torture.

In the Arab world, shaming techniques such as the imposing of perverse acts and the exposure of nudity are especially useful to Western opponents who aim to subjugate Arab men and the Arab population in general (qtd. in Puar 22). A majority of the victims that gave an account of their abuse and torture pointed to the extensive usage of cameras as tools of violence, humiliation, and shame (Dauphinee 147). Some scholars even argue that “the visual record [created during the Abu Ghraib scandal] is part of the torture” (147) and constitutes an essential element of the oppression of Iraqi detainees. Due to many Muslim’s critical opinion about homosexuality, Muslim men are often assumed to be humiliated when forced to assume the female, submissive part during sexual intercourse with another man (22). Not only a presumed homosexual identity enacted through same-sex sexual relations and abuse, but also, as pointed out above, the feminization of the male Iraqi prisoners was a successful tool in shaming and dominating especially the male detainees. By capturing the forceful enactment of homosexuality with their cameras the presumed acts of sodomy “constitute[d] the worst form of torture” for the Iraqi men (Puar 33). This exposure to the camera, a tool of torture, threatened to not only personally humiliate the detainees but also publicly shame them. In her account of the events at Abu Ghraib, Michelle Brown even claims that some of the prisoners were confronted with photographs of the abuse of other detainees at Abu Ghraib in order to make them fear their interrogators and to prove how far the latter were willing to take the questioning (131). Brown further explains that “another threat involved the circulation of photos to family and friends beyond the prison in a culture in which photographed sexualized acts and poses would be perceived as shameful and devastating” (131). As a result, by intimidating the
detainees and threatening to expose the evidence of their sexual abuse and exposure of their genitals to their countrymen, the guards at Abu Ghraib managed to keep the Iraqi men oppressed. This threat of constant exposure constitutes a surveilling gaze that appears to be constantly present. Not knowing if the threat is real at any time, the detainees might continually fear that images, such as “Lynndie the Leasher”, and the photograph of the pile of naked detainees, or other pictures featuring nudity and homosexual acts, might be leaked a third party. The voyeuristic, surveilling gaze thus seems to be continuously subjugating the Iraqi detainees in a system of assumed threat and real oppression.

Yet, the homosexual, abusive acts, their depictions in the photographs, and even their interpretation by scholars and the media caused a vital backlash from some critics. Especially members of the GLBTQ community seemed ashamed by the fact that the Abu Ghraib photos seemed to reveal the hostility and widespread homophobia of the U.S. military (24). This concern reflects the fears and anxieties of members of the homosexual community, especially within the military, and appears to originate in their own oppression and humiliation. Yet, Puar criticizes this focus on a homosexual perspective. She argues that, by centering their concerns on “the (white) gay male subject as the paradigmatic victim of the assaulting images”, author’s such as Moore fail to recognize that the photographs are not only representative of the U.S. military’s homophobic tendencies, but that their aim to cause shame among the detainees is also “racist, misogynistic, and imperialistic” (24). Indeed, taking pleasure in looking at the torture photographs seems to not only be motivated by sexual or erotic desires or a fascination with violence, but this form of spectatorship is also caught up in racial and ethnic dichotomies. Since the sexual abuse performed at Abu Ghraib can “be viewed as reproducing … foundational moments of colonial rule” (Pugliese 265), it enacts oppression and dominance on its subjects by subjugating them not only to a sexualized, but also an orientalist gaze.

4. Orientalism, Stereotypes, and Racist Oppression

Especially the feminization of Arab men that has been discussed in the previous section is also reminiscent of oriental, racist stereotypes and clichés that denigrate the Iraqi detainees who are marked as less masculine than their white oppressors as ‘other’. In fact, the gendered and racial hierarchies established at the Abu Ghraib prison and in the war on terror in general are redefined and enforced through the guards’ and the public spectators’ orientalist gaze. Therefore, the visual system of power is rooted in the imperial history of the United States. In addition, Sturken and Cartwright claim that “[o]rientalism creates a binary opposition between
the West (The Occident) and the East (the Orient), with negative and fetishistic fantasies to the latter” (114) and consequently enables the establishment of the power structures and the sexual forms of abuse mentioned above. However, in order to understand the oppressive and violent dynamics at work at the Abu Ghraib prison, one needs to not only consider the area’s colonial history and the stereotypical identification of the Orient as ‘other’, but also the history of war and terror between the United States and the Arab world. Influenced through, what Brown has termed, a “chain of pain” (9) in the aftermath of 9/11, the scandal at Abu Ghraib appears to be standing in direct relation to the attack. As part of the United States’ reaction to the threat of terrorism, the events at Abu Ghraib reflect the country’s attempt at taking control of the situation. By suppressing the Iraqis, who are suspected to have connections to terrorist organizations, the military guards endeavor to regain the control and autonomy that was infringed by the terrorist attacks. As a result, reflecting a history of pain and suffering, the Abu Ghraib incident reinforces the long-standing differences and struggles for power and dominance between the East and the West.

One of the ways in which difference was established at the Abu Ghraib military detention facility and the representation of the abuse that happened there, is the stark differentiation between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ through the orientalist, colonial gaze of the oppressors. Projected onto space – namely the Iraqi country and the bodies of the Iraqi detainees – this gaze functions to uphold the U.S. military’s dominance over the assumed terrorist-prisoners. In addition, the images of this distant, exotic place enable the spectators at home to “not perceive themselves as accountable for others’ suffering” (Zelizer qtd. in Rentschler 300). The distance between the spectators and the victims at Abu Ghraib is thus not only physically but also culturally, ethnically, and racially inscribed and expanded by the spectators’ inability to adequately respond to the abuse at Abu Ghraib. The Arab world is identified as an exotic space impacted by the imperial power of the United States, but too distant to make the viewers of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs feel responsible for the sexual abuse and (visual) oppression of the Iraqis. Through the violent occupation of Iraq, the oppressed bodies of the Iraqi detainees “become coextensive of space as such: they are the ground upon which military operations of occupation are performed and through which control of the colonized country is secured” (Pugliese 272). The bodies of the detainees come to stand in for the exotic place in which they live. By conquering the bodies and inflicting pain, suffering, and violence upon them, the U.S. military has symbolically conquered the space in which these bodies exist – the Arab world. Aligning with what Elkins has said about
the gaze (21-22), the American offenders and conquerors have taken possession of the bodies, and subsidiary also the Iraqi country. Thus objectified, the Iraqi men are rendered exotic, colonized, and ‘other’. In the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, this becomes evident in the way in which violated, dead bodies are depicted. They are exposed to the gaze of the torturers, bystanders, photographers, and the viewers at home. Often, their identities can be discerned and dead bodies of the exotic ‘other’ are represented without hesitation or shame. The two photographs of a lifeless body in a black plastic bag are exemplary for this disrespectful depiction of the pain and death of Iraqi people. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag explains that “the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (66). Additionally, Barbie Zelizer author of About to Die suggests:

Arguments – about our dead versus their dead about civilian versus military dead about showing the faces of the dead about class, race, and the dead … – were caught in the tension between what John Taylor called “polite looking” and the “prolonged, uncontrolled staring” with impunity into another’s misfortune, inviting revulsion, “identification and reflection, rejection and denial, and moments to be inquisitive about the dreadful fate of others.” (19)

The spectators of the Abu Ghraib photographs certainly seem to be staring “prolonged [and] uncontrolled” as Zelizer has argued (19). Not covering the faces or genitals of the violated bodies they were photographing, Graner, Frederick, and Harman enabled the viewer to stare at the detainees and take pleasure in looking at the Iraqi’s misfortune. All the while, by posing smiling in the background of the images of a dead Iraqi detainee, they seem to tell the spectator that it is unobjectionable to subject the victims of the abuse to the sexualized, racialized gaze of the photographers’ friends, families, and respectively a large proportion of the world. However, not only the unconscionable representation of the oppressed and powerless Iraqi detainees contributes to the stark hierarchical relationship between them and the voyeurs of their suffering.

Instead, the fact that this voyeuristic gaze is informed by orientalist stereotypes, fosters the subjugation of the Iraqi prisoners. Edward Said, one of the most widely read authors on this topic, has defined “Orientalism [as] a praxis of the same sort, albeit in different territories, as male gender dominance, or patriarchy. [He asserts that] … the Orient was routinely described as feminine, its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem, and the despotic – but curiously attractive – ruler” (104). Resulting in the oppression of Eastern and Middle Eastern people, Orientalism has been used by Western cultures to
stereotype and estrange these cultures. Denying them the right to self-representation, especially American Orientalists have identified Arab cultures as exotic, barbaric, “foreign, strange, and other” (Sturken and Cartwright 113). This history of representation through a predominately Western (white) discourse has fostered many racist depictions. In the Abu Ghraib photographs orientalist stereotypes are also prominent. In fact, through the torture and sexual abuse of the Iraqi prisoners the power relations of the gaze have become not only sexually, but also racially structured. In “Lynndie the Leasher”, for instance, the Iraqi detainee is objectified and subjugated to a Western supremacist gaze. Like an animal, he is attached to a leash. As a result, he is defined as less than human – an animal or object at best. Similarly, in the image of the human pyramid of bodies, the Iraqi detainees are piled on the ground. They are naked and only their heads are covered with plastic bags. Lying on the ground in trash bags they evoke the notion that they are trash or dirt rather than human beings. Finally, Susan Sontag argues that such a scandal as Abu Ghraib and the visual regimes established around it reflect the racism that has dominated the power structures between the East and the West (92). She further claims that this system of racism and oppression enables the legitimization of violence and renders people, such as the Iraqi detainees, as inhuman (92). The most iconic of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, the “Vietnam”, is especially reminiscent of the dehumanization of the prisoners. In fact, scholars have read the photographs, and this particular image, against backgrounds of the Vietnam War photographs, Orientalism, fetishization and feminization, as well as pornography (Brown 149). While not all of them agree on the various interpretations the photographs enable, many scholars have suggested that the Abu Ghraib torture pictures recall the black victimization of the American lynching photographs. Objectifying the Iraqi detainees through the piercing gaze of the orientalist, racist spectators, the Abu Ghraib photographs help to establish a white, Western supremacy.

Similar to the Iraqi detainees, many black victims of lynching were also perceived as inhuman, and, as a result, were subjected not only to oppression and racism, but also to extreme violence and even murder. The “Vietnam”, the photograph of the hooded detainee standing on a box, arms wide spread, wires attached to his hands, feet, and genitals, is mostly brought into connection with the lynching pictures that remind of the horrors of racism. Some scholars have implied that the hood of the Iraqi detainee reminds of the Ku Klux Klan’s attire, while the position of the detainee’s body is reminiscent of the exposure and execution of black victims in the U.S. South (Apel 92, Eisenman 13, and Puar 30). Lynching was a prominent practice 19th century America. Hangings and executions, along with other violations of the bodies and
the humanity of the black victims of lynching, served as forms of intimidation and racial oppression. Similarly, the abuse and torture at Abu Ghræib function to intimidate, humiliate, and oppress the Iraqi victims. According to Susan Sontag, “intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it” (91). Concerning the representation of violence and the ways in which a racist gaze contributed to the oppression of both the black lynching victims and the Iraqi detainees, photography constitutes a significant link between the two events. Both, the lynching and the torture at Abu Ghræib, were captured on camera by photographers, curious bystanders, and even by the offenders themselves (Sontag, “What”). Assuming the role of spectators, the men and women involved in the violent acts created visual evidence of the events, the trophy-like photographs had the character of souvenirs (Dauphinee 144). Literally being able to own the photographs, the spectators had thus materialized their desire to look at and possess the objects of their gaze and of their abuse. The theatrical staging of the Abu Ghræib photographs emphasizes their souvenir-like character. The pictures remind of vacation photos because Graner and Harman often posed next to the victims as if they were sights at an exotic tourist hotspot. As a result, the images objectify the Iraqi detainees and mark them as ‘other’ instead of recognizing them as human beings. The souvenir-like photographs and the racist, stereotypical gaze of the spectators reveal that the relationship between the torturers and their victims is oppressive. The objects of this voyeuristic gaze are often denied basic human rights and are seldom allowed to return the gaze of their oppressor (Denzin 58). Consequently, they remain objectified, dehumanized, and forced into an inferior position. The Abu Ghræib torture photographs seem to confirm what Norman Denzin has proposed in his work on voyeurism: Not only Orientalism, but also the color line, and thus race, affect the ways in which the gaze is structured (58).

5. **Hooding, Powerlessness, and the Absence of the Gaze**

Finally, the objectification of the detainees and their oppression through the spectators’ gaze are emphasized by the absence of the Iraqis’ own gaze. This absence rendered them powerless. In fact, being exposed to other people’s gazes while unable to return the gaze leaves the Iraqi prisoners vulnerable and at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of power (Pugliese 257). In the staged, theatrical acts of torture and the photographs thereof they seem to be defenseless props – objects that because they are hooded, are rendered vulnerable and inferior to the seeing spectators. Joseph Pugliese elaborates on this issue:
The victim’s gaze is either entirely occluded by hoods or, alternatively, she or he is compelled to be photographed with an averted look that vitiates the power (a)symmetrically to return the gaze and thereby disrupts an unequal relation of visual power. In foreclosing the possibility for the victim of torture to return the gaze, a univocal relation of scopic power is preserved, whilst the victim is positioned as an emblematic figure of Orientalist capture. (Pugliese 257)

The one way access of the gaze and the imbalance of power it causes is also reflected in the circulation of the photographs among friends and families of the guards and in the media. Once the photographs are taken, they can be disseminated widely and looked at by a variety of voyeurs whom the detainees’ are unaware of. They are pictured on the photographs – inanimate, two-dimensional – and cannot engage in this visual system of power. As a result of their inability to return the gaze once the images have been circulated, the Iraqi detainees are objectified and dominated by an unidentified spectator. Respectively, two important theorists, Sartre and Lacan, have argued that “I can feel myself ‘under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not see’ . . . All that is necessary is for something to ‘signify to me that there may be others there’” (qtd. in Denzin 45). Simply knowing photographs had been taken signifies the presence of the spectator and the detainees must have constantly felt observed. Unaware of the identity of the voyeur and the excessive dissemination of the photographs of their abuse, the gaze of the voyeur constitutes a continuous threat and form of oppression. This informs the imbalance of power that was reflected in the Abu Ghraib torture photographs. Unable to disarm or even return the gaze of their oppressor, the detainees were defenseless. Since, according to Susan Sontag, “the other … is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees” (72), the detainees who remain faceless and powerless are marked as ‘other’ by the oppressive spectators – they are seen as less than human. As a result, the gaze and even its absence functioned as a tool of subordination and violence.

6. Conclusion

The photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison not only revealed the scandalous torture and abuse of Iraqi detainees through the hands of American soldiers, but also functioned as tools of oppression and violence. By taking photographs of their wrongdoings and observing their own partaking in a spectacle of violence and abuse, the guards at Abu Ghraib proved to be “not just amateur photographers, but amateur torturers” (Gourevitch and Morris 263). Conflating their own gaze with the gaze of millions of spectators abroad by capturing the Iraqi detainees on camera, Harman, Graner, and the other military personnel at the prison assured the continuous subordination of the prisoners. Throughout the events at Abu Ghraib and
through the photographs that keep them in our collective memory, the gaze has been adapted as a weapon of war. This is especially emphasized by the statement of a detainee who claims that “they were taking pictures of [him] during all these instances” (qtd. in Pugliese 260). This testimony stresses the tremendous humiliating effect the cameras’ presence had on many of the Iraqi prisoners who were subjected to the spectators’ gendered, sexualized, racist, and orientalist gaze. Simultaneously unable to return this gaze, the detainees were rendered defenseless and marked as inhuman and ‘other’ by their oppressors. Jasbir Puar has summed up the significance of the Abu Ghraib photographs by asserting that the process of photographing the abuse and its product, the photographs, function as “shaming technologies” in the humiliation and degradation of the ‘other’ (31). Through the unrestrained power of the gaze, the detainees are caught in this system of oppression. Certainly, the oppressive, racist, sexualized gaze is not the only form of spectatorship that can be traced throughout these photographs and their production. However, it likely constitutes one of the more devastating and destructive visual regimes that have informed not only our culture, politics, relationships, and societies, but also our memory.
Appendix

Picture 1: May 20: Specialist Sabrina Harman, 26, grins as she poses alongside the corpse of an Iraqi detainee in Abu Ghraib prison. The photograph was obtained by ABC News, which identified the dead man as Manadel al-Jamadi. The broadcaster has evidence that the man was brought to the prison by US navy seals in good health.

Picture 2: May 20: Specialist Charles Graner poses alongside the corpse of an Iraqi detainee in Abu Ghraib prison. The photograph was obtained by ABC News, which identified the dead man as Manadel al-Jamadi. The broadcaster has evidence that the man was brought to the prison by US navy seals in good health.

Picture 3: Published in the New Yorker
10.05.04: Picture piles pressure on Bush

Picture 4: Published in the New Yorker
30.04.04: US military in torture scandal

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Picture 5:
Published in the
New Yorker
06.05.04: Protest
at horrors of jail

Picture 6:
Published in the
Washington Post
13.05.04: 'They
stole my dignity'
Works Cited


Ilfeld den 30.04.2015

Ort, Datum, eigenhändige Unterschrift