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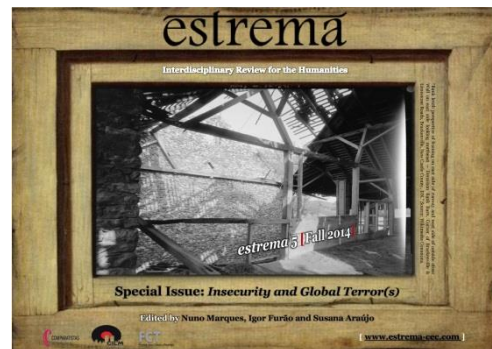
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*Experimenting with Torture:
Abu Ghraib through the lens of Paul Scheuring's The Experiment*¹

Ana Romão² and Susana Araújo³

Abstract

In the turmoil of the Iraq War, the scandal of what happened at Abu Ghraib leaked through in the form of photographs depicting scenes of torture and humiliation that are usually kept away from public attention. This article reflects on how that event changed the way we think about terror and violence and how they are represented on the silver screen. The article will focus on the 2010 movie *The Experiment*, itself a dramatization of the 1971 “Stanford Prison” psychology experiment.

The article will analyze to what extent the representation of certain characters, plots and motifs in the film are influenced by images taken from the Abu Ghraib photographs. The article will further explore what the overlaps between movie and photographic images tell us about the complex processes of psychological identification in a context shaped by fear and hatred. The article ultimately seeks to ponder the subversive influence of the Abu Ghraib photos on *The Experiment*, and how that influence is portrayed.

Keywords: torture; intermedia; representation; humiliation; identification; power; dehumanization.

1 ROMÃO, Ana, Susana ARAÚJO. 2014. “Experimenting with Torture: Abu Ghraib through the lens of Paul Scheuring’s *The Experiment*.” Special Issue: *Insecurity and Global Terror(s), estrema: Interdisciplinary Review for the Humanities* 5 (Fall). www.estrema-cec.com.

2 Center for English Studies of the University of Lisbon.

3 Center for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon.

In 2004 the world came to know the horrors that took place at the Iraqi prison formerly used by Saddam Hussein's regime, Abu Ghraib, through various photographs taken by some of the American Military Police stationed there during the Iraq war. These photos shocked and appalled people everywhere, especially U.S. citizens, who believed this type of behavior was neither performed nor permitted amongst U.S. troops. Most of the photographs display soldiers, men and women, cheerily posing next to Iraqi detainees shown in degrading positions: naked in the majority of them, sometimes bleeding, sometimes hooded.⁴

This article will reflect on how the Abu Ghraib photographs changed the way Western societies think about terror and violence and how these are visually represented on the silver screen, by focusing on the 2010 movie *The Experiment*,⁵ in light of the context in which it was produced – i.e. the “War on Terror.” To achieve this, a detailed contextualization of the historical elements that lead up to the controversial pictures will be presented first, culminating in an intermedial analysis of the issue of representation (namely, the self-representation of the guards in the Abu Ghraib photographs and the representation of characters “performing” the role of guards in the movie).

The 1987 “Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment” signed by the U.S. defines torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession,” and states that “[n]o exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture” (United Nations, n.d.). Hundreds of prisoners held by U.S. troops were not given the status of war prisoners, in accordance with the Geneva Convention,⁶ and they were held indefinitely without the right to an attorney or a trial, for they were “unlawful combatants,” as was explained by the then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld: “They will be handled not as prisoners of war, because they are not, but as unlawful combatants, and ... technically, unlawful

4 A selection of photographs can be found at: “Torture Scandal, The Images that Shamed America,” accessed December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/gall/0,8542,1211872,00.html>.

5 *The Experiment*. Directed by Paul Scheuring. Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2010. DVD.

6 The Fourth Geneva Convention was signed in 1949 by the United States of America. A set of international laws state that it is forbidden to torture, make attempts towards personal dignity, humiliate and degrade detainees. “In international law, and even under the Fourth Geneva Convention which exempts some detainees from the rights of prisoner of war, there is an injunction to treat such people ‘with humanity’, thus constituting an implicit, and unqualified, prohibition of the right of states, or other to torture” (Halliday 2010, 87).

combatants do not have any rights under the Geneva Convention” (Ghosts of Abu Ghraib 2007).

The White House reinforced its representation of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist military group by stating its disrespect for conventional warfare and thus portraying its members or supporters as “a modern equivalent of ... *outlaw*, someone who was not only themselves operating outside the law, i.e. a criminal, but who could be treated outside any legal framework” (Halliday 2010, 89). From this point a character of exception could then be applied to the War in Iraq and the use of torture could be legitimized, which resulted in loosening the limitations of interrogation. As proof of the experimentation with boundaries at that time, there is a formerly classified memo from the Department of Defense approving the harsher interrogation methods. At the end of the document, in Rumsfeld’s own handwriting, we can read: “However, I stand for 8-10 hour a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours? D.R.” (“The Interrogation documents,” n.d).

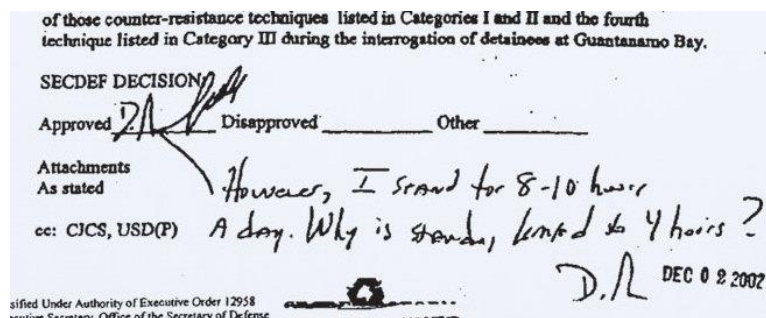


Image 1. Detail from a formerly classified memo issued by the Department of Defense (02.12.2002). Source: Public Domain.

This document reveals the involvement and knowledge of those higher in the chain of command. To enforce significant changes in Abu Ghraib, Rumsfeld decided to bring someone from the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, the infamous American detainment and interrogation facility located within Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba.⁷ This controversial facility was established in the wake of 9/11 by the Bush Administration in 2002 to hold detainees from the war in Afghanistan and later Iraq.⁸

The person in charge of the operations in Guantánamo Bay was Major General Geoffrey Miller,⁹ who was recognized for being able to obtain information from the

⁷ *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Directed by Rory Kennedy, 2007. DVD.

⁸ “Guantanamo Bay Naval Station Fast Facts,” *CNN*, accessed December 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/09/world/guantanamo-bay-naval-station-fast-facts/>.

⁹ “General Who Ran Guantanamo Bay Retires,” *The Washington Post*, accessed December 2013. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/31/AR2006073101183.html>.

detainees. So in 2003, a year before the scandal, Rumsfeld sent General Miller to Abu Ghraib as the facility was not producing the same outcomes. Brigadier General Janis Karpinski was Chief of the Military Police and in charge of the operations in Abu Ghraib at the time.¹⁰ In an interview she stated that when General Miller got to Abu Ghraib he said that the prisoners were being treated too kindly, and, if they wanted to get information, this needed to change; they would have to treat them “like dogs.” On this trip General Miller left information on how to proceed in a way that would ensure they got the results they expected. Karpinski claimed that General Miller planned to (in his own words) “Gitmoize¹¹ Abu Ghraib” (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007).

A memo was then issued by Lieutenant Ricardo Sanchez for the use of extreme techniques. Among the methods approved are “Emotional hate: Playing on the genuine hatred or desire for revenge a security internee has for an individual group” and “Fear up harsh: Significantly increasing the fear level in a security internee” (“October Sanchez,” n.d.). These methods are clearly meant to degrade the detainees, emotionally and physically. During his visit to Abu Ghraib General Miller changed the role of the Military Police in the detention camp. Before they were only assigned as prison guards (even if this was not part of their military training); from then on, they were asked to “prepare” the detainees for interrogation, or, as Private Lynndie England puts it, “to soften them up” (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007). This would make the interrogation process more effective, for as J. M. Coetzee writes in his novel *Diary of a Bad Year*: “If an animal is going to have its throat cut, does it really matter that it has its leg tendons cut too?” (Coetzee 2008, 65). This “preparation” consisted in (amongst other things) the removal of clothing, stress positions, hooding, sexual humiliation, sensory disorientation and phobias (e.g. fear of dogs).¹²

The detainees were also submitted to a special kind of intimidation. It came to be known that during the interrogations female members of the Military Intelligence would taunt the detainees, flashing their body and underwear, sometimes sitting on their laps and forcing the interrogated to touch them. These women would also claim they were menstruating and would smear fake menstrual blood on the detainee’s faces preventing them from praying as a means to resist the strain of the interrogation, for they were then

10 “Abu Ghraib head finds vindication in newly released memos,” *CNN.com/US*, accessed December 2013. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/US/04/22/us.torture.karpinski/>.

11 After the military abbreviation of the Guantanamo naval base: GITMO.

12 “The Policy of Abuse,” *The Washington Post*, accessed December 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A30039-2004May15.html>.

unclean according to their religion. The Military Police would then cut off the water supply to their cells so they were unable to clean themselves (Zimbardo 2007, 426). There is even a term to designate the female members of the Military Intelligence who engaged in this kind of practice (both in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib), “torture chicks” (“Torture Chicks,” n.d.). From these stressful conditions the photographs taken by the Military Police were divulged.

The article will provide an analysis of some of those photographs and how they will inform the film *The Experiment*. It will also discuss how violence and torture are explored intermedially after “9/11” and the “War on Terror” and how Western societies represent their “Others” in times of conflict.

Shortly after being assigned the night shift at Tier 1 A the soldiers of the MP stationed at Abu Ghraib began taking photographs of each other with the detainees they were supposed to guard. Allegedly they were meant to be shown to other detainees as a way to make them fear the same fate and disclose any information they might have.¹³ However the reality of what we *see* in them does not translate into a way to get confessions. These photos show U.S. Military Police standing next to the tortured bodies of Iraqi men, not in “military poses,” but as if they were on vacation, smiling, giving the viewer the “thumbs up.” The photos here discussed imply a voyeuristic interest in the scenes they portrait and offer, as part of the same fascination, a vision of the extreme violence that conjured them.

Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that “words alter, words add, words subtract” (2003, I); on the other hand, images mirror the facts, pristine and unalterable. And they will not ever go away. “It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality” (Žižek 2002, 16). Žižek wrote in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* about the images of the falling twin towers on September 11 that “the real in its extreme violence [is] the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (2002, 5). For Žižek the images made “real” a widespread fantasy which, in th popular imagination, has long been associated with the destruction of the U.S. In this sense, it can be argued that The Abu Ghraib photos also peel off “deceptive layers of reality,” by deconstructing both the pristine image of the brave American soldier as well as notions of “honourable war,” promoted not only by political discourse but by US popular culture.

¹³ *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Directed by Rory Kennedy, 2007. DVD.

As Susan Sontag has shown, the Abu Ghraib images are not very dissimilar from the photos of the lynching of black people, which persisted in the United States until the 1930's.¹⁴ In many of these early photographs we can usually see, alongside the acts of violence and torture, a crowd either pleased or indifferent. As Sontag states: "the lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib" (2003, 72).

This violence is clear in Abu Ghraib photographs such as those where the detainees are hooded and made fun of by the cheery poses of the Military Police and reinforced by the fact that the prisoners were photographed (in itself an abuse of authority by the guards) in shameful positions and often naked. The removal of clothes and the hooding effectively deprived them of individuality, and the photographs portraying the use of dogs demonstrate the physical pain (for it is documented that some detainees were in fact bitten) and the extreme fear they were exposed to.

One of the more reproduced images within the large group of Abu Ghraib photographs is the picture of a detainee standing on a box, hooded, and dressed in a big piece of cloth, with wires attached to his hands. This detainee (25-year-old Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, later found not guilty of the charges against him) was nicknamed "Gilligan" by Corporal Graner because he kept identifying himself with different names. The prisoner was told that if he fell of the box he would be electrocuted, and even though Specialist Harman claimed that there was no electricity running through those wires, the threat was by itself very effective. In addition to the effort required to stand still on top of a box with his arms open, the hood effectively caused sensory disorientation. It is also significant to observe, in the uncropped version of the photo, Sergeant Ivan Frederick with his camera, which is a testament to the indifference shown towards these procedures in Abu Ghraib.

14 Susan Sontag. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux. A selection of these photographs can also be found at: "Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America," *Without Sanctuary*, accessed December 2013, <http://withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>.



Image 2. Uncropped photograph of Private Lynndie England holding a leash linked to a Iraqi detainee as Specialist Megan Ambuhl observes at Abu Ghraib. Source: Public Domain.

An even more infamous photograph is the one where Private Lynndie England holds a leash linked to a naked detainee. This photo, related to “dominatrix” imagery, shocked due to the posture of dominion of the “woman soldier” over the “Other.” In front of the camera we are others than ourselves, as Roland Barthes explained in his work *Camera Lucida*, “[i]n front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am” (2000, 13). The identity the soldiers created for the camera (as the “dominatrix” photo illustrates) is meant to be perceived as superior. Usually this photo is seen cropped, where we can only see Private England and the detainee, but significantly, in an uncropped version of it, we see Specialist Megan Ambuhl leaning against the wall, with her hands on her pockets, observing the scene. She may be taken as the representative of all the Military Police who dispassionately watched the severe mistreatment of detainees without intervening.

Another highly reproduced photograph was the one where two Military Police (Corporal Charles Graner and Specialist Sabrina Harman) stand behind a group of naked and hooded detainees stacked into what came to be referred to as a “pyramid.” On “top” of the pyramid (from the photo’s perspective) stands a proud and smiling Corporal Graner, with arms crossed and giving the camera the “thumbs up.” Significantly, however, the image of another soldier, Specialist Harman, almost goes unnoticed in this photo, and nearly seems to be part of the pile of bodies, unintentionally disclosing an unexpected identification with the humiliated prisoners themselves. It can be argued that this photo discloses the way the Military Police were also, to a great

extent, manipulated by their superiors and unconsciously shared with the detainees an inescapable sense of powerlessness. Indeed, as Susana Araújo writes, referring to these photographs, “[t]he eye of the camera seems to give social coherence to acts of both sadism and humiliation, at the same time that it discloses uncomfortable social projections which could not be narrated otherwise” (2006, 197).

In another similar pyramid photograph we see Private England and Corporal Graner, both smiling and giving the thumbs up, standing behind a group of naked detainees, seen from behind, which is even more degrading and humiliating. We also can see some writing on one of the detainee’s legs; it reads “I am a rapist.” The misspelling of the word ‘rapist’ also reveals the specific background of the U.S. soldiers sent to Iraq. Such a photo shows that the soldiers not only deprived the detainees of their identity, but that they also imposed a new identity on them by literally “labeling” them.



Image 3. Writing on a detainee's body. Source: Public Domain

Lastly, two highly polemical photographs are also worth mentioning: the photos where Corporal Graner and Specialist Harman appear smiling and giving the “thumbs up” next to a dead body. In an interview presented in the documentary *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, Harman explained her smile and posture by saying that it was “just the natural thing to do when you’re in front of a camera” (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007). The dead man was Manadel al-Jamadi, suspected of bombing a Red Cross facility in Baghdad. Thanks to these photos his was the only death at Abu Ghraib to be ruled as homicide, since they were trying to convince the uninvolved that he had died from a heart attack; the photos were undisputed evidence of violent aggression.¹⁵ Even though Specialist Harman and Corporal Graner were charged for the photos, those who committed the murder (the Military Intelligence during interrogation) were never brought to justice. Also, it came

¹⁵ *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. Directed by Rory Kennedy, 2007. DVD.

to be known that al-Jamadi was nicknamed by some at Abu Ghraib “The Iceman” and “Mr. Frosty,” for after his death the Military Intelligence placed him in a bathroom for several hours and covered him with ice bags. Others called him “Bernie,” hinting at the movie *Weekend at Bernie’s* in which a dead body is treated as if still alive. We are again brought to the importance of identification, of labeling yourself and the “Other.” By opting to nickname al-Jamadi, the Military Police managed to dehumanize the lifeless body, reducing it to a comfortable private joke instead of facing the uncomfortable truth of torture and murder.

2010 saw the release of a film entitled *The Experiment* directed by Paul Scheuring (known best for the 2005 hit series *Prison Break*) and starring Adrian Brody and Forest Whitaker. This movie did not get a chance at the box office; it was a direct-to-DVD production. Despite having an A-list cast and an action-packed plot, the film was somehow deemed unfit for theater release. Could it be that the portrayal of violence directed toward the “Other” was a painful reminder of episodes like the scandal of the Abu Ghraib photographs?

Although this movie is not a direct representation of the events that took place at Abu Ghraib (and despite its overly dramatized storyline to suit the Hollywood market), it can help us perceive the underlying influence that such images as the ones depicted in the Abu Ghraib photographs had on the silver screen. The movie tells the story of Travis, a free spirit in need of money, and Barris, a mild-mannered man living under the abuses of his mother. They both participate in a social experiment in a secluded “prison” where a group of men must portray “guards” while the remaining participants must portray “prisoners.”

The Experiment (a remake of the 2001 German *Das Experiment*)¹⁶ is based on a psychological experiment conducted in 1971 at Northern California’s Stanford University by the Psychology Professor, Philip Zimbardo. Zimbardo’s goal in his experiment was to answer the question: “[w]hat happens when you put good people in an evil place?”, “[c]ould the institution come to control your behavior, or did your attitude, values and morality allow you to rise above a negative environment?” (*The Stanford Prison Experiment* 2002). The basement at Stanford University was turned into a makeshift prison. Attracted by the 15 dollars a day they would be paid to take part, many students applied for this experiment. After some tests a select group was later

16 *Das Experiment*. Directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel. Berlin/New York: Senator Film (Germany)/ The Samuel Goldwyn Company (U.S.), 2001. DVD.

divided in two and each man was randomly assigned the role of guard or prisoner and received their instructions.

This experience turned out to be more enlightening than was first expected, and ultimately got out of control, for as one student said: “once you put on that uniform you become a guard” (*The Stanford Prison Experiment* 2002). The immersion in the character allowed them to truly identify with the role they were playing: the uniform, the rough language, the rules, all of these aspects helped the students to actually convert into guards. It is also worthy of notice that the experiment was both watched from behind a one-way window as well as recorded by hidden cameras (Zimbardo 2007, 131) for research purposes and in the footage we can find eerie resemblances to the imagery surrounding the Abu Ghraib scandal (for example, the image of the hooded detainee).

The “guards” were told they had to maintain order, but could not use physical violence (*The Stanford Prison Experiment* 2002). As soon as the slightest form of insurgence was felt by the “guards” they were not shy to retaliate by engaging in degrading processes and humiliating the “prisoners” by doing things like putting bags on their heads. As the documentary *The Stanford Prison Experiment* displays, Hellmann (one of the “guards”), took particular enjoyment in his role, he was even nicknamed “John Wayne” for his macho attitude and strong persona. In Zimbardo’s *The Lucifer Effect*, his own recollection and considerations regarding the experiment, he writes:

John Wayne was the nickname for the guard who was the meanest and toughest of them all; ... Of course I was eager to see who he was and what he was doing that attracted so much attention. ... I was absolutely stunned to see that their John Wayne was the ‘really nice guy’ with whom I had chatted earlier. Only now, he was transformed into someone else. He not only moved differently, but he talked differently – With a Southern accent. (Zimbardo 2007, 169).

In an interview Hellmann said that he made a conscientious decision to act like that, for in his mind that was what was expected of him. He would take the lead role in the majority of the humiliations, owning the night shift, and was never contradicted by the other “guards,” even being joined by them. The sunglasses “John Wayne” and the rest of the guards wore were given to them by Zimbardo’s team. They were meant to help the process of dissociating the “guards” from the “prisoners,” effectively blocking eye contact, thus providing the “guards” a tougher exterior as well as a wall to hide behind.



Image 4. “Guards” and “prisoners” at Stanford University (1971).
Source: Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (New York: Random House, 2007), 131.

Zimbardo’s final assessment of this experiment, that came to be known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, was that “the evil place won over the good people” (*The Stanford Prison Experiment* 2002) and that such situational forces as those described here did not directly prod the guards into doing bad things, it was “the situational forces ... that created freedom from the usual social and moral constraints on abusive actions” (Zimbardo 2007, 352).

In the previous paragraphs we examined how the Stanford Prison Experiment, was an important influence to the film *The Experiment*. Having done that, we will now turn our attention to the analysis of torture and abuse in *The Experiment*, in order to show how the film re-enacts, aesthetically and thematically, different sources of violence represented in the Abu Ghraib photographs.

Clear allusions to the photos, and of the specific context in which they were taken, emerge from the very beginning of the film, when some of the characters in the movie are assigned the role of “guards,” although they clearly lack knowledge or experience to perform their tasks, much like the Military Police in charge of Tier 1 A in Abu Ghraib. This lack of experience is confirmed early in the movie when Dr. Archuleta (the main researcher) tells the participants that they will only be accepted in the experiment if they have never been incarcerated before. Their lack of experience is seen as valuable not least because it reveals how the new environment can, in itself, transform people with no prior familiarity with imprisonment in contexts of warfare.

The character of Barris embodies many of the traits of in Hellmann's "John Wayne" in the Stanford experiment. He performs the role of instigator and leader amongst the "guards" – a role that seems to grow out of his own lack of confidence in himself and his own masculinity. Indeed, in the Stanford experiment, Hellmann's "John Wayne" had not, at first, revealed bold "masculine" traits: prior to the experiment Hellman had been evaluated with the lowest score on the topic of "Masculinity" in *The Comrey Personality Scales*,¹⁷ performed by Zimbardo and had been described as someone who "does not cry easily, [and is] not interested in love stories" [Zimbardo 2007, 199]. These psychological traits are central to the representation of Barris's background in the film: educated to be a "God-fearing man," Barris had been psychologically abused by his mother, who emasculated him and made him feel impotent. Hence, the experiment allowed Barris to gain the sense of power and control that his sick and elderly mother never allowed him to have at home. In the "prison" he lives the fantasy of being in charge for once, and overcoming, thus, his own sense of castration.

Through the character of Travis we experience the plot from a different perspective. From the beginning he offers resistance to the violence that imposes itself increasingly throughout the film. During the tests of admittance Travis is guided to the inside of a tiny compartment where he watches a series of mainly violent clips on a screen. We can observe that his head is wired, so the researchers are able to evaluate his responses to the clips.¹⁸

Once the test subjects are assigned to the position of either "guard" or "prisoner" and put on the clothes accordingly they begin to settle into their roles. Much like the students at Stanford, or the Military Police at Abu Ghraib, these characters soon found that the uniform validated actions. Barris quickly begins to assume the lead in the film. This can be witnessed in the scene where, because the "guards" could not use physical violence against the "prisoners," he comes up with the idea of acting like they do in fraternity houses,¹⁹ as he says: "they [the fraternity brothers] couldn't hurt us, but they

17 *The Comrey Personality Scales* is an inventory composed of several multiple choice items designed to evaluate the personality of the subject tested.

18 This scene is highly evocative of a scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), where the protagonist is submitted to something called "Ludovico" Technique, a fictional experimental aversion therapy for rehabilitating violent perpetrators. Travis reacts with repugnance, clearly affected by the suffering and evil presented to him, echoing the reaction of Alex, the exuberant main character of *A Clockwork Orange*. See *A Clockwork Orange*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. California: Columbia-Warner Distributors, 1971. DVD.

19 This type of discourse evokes the words of Rush Limbaugh, a conservative American radio talk show host and political commentator, on his *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, the highest-rated talk-radio program in the United States of America: "This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones"¹⁹

could do something much worse, they could humiliate us. That's what we have to do" (*The Experiment* 2010).

Regarding the issue of finding pleasure among violence we are reminded by Zimbardo in *The Lucifer Effect* that Private Lynndie England and Corporal Charles Graner often engaged in "torrid sexual escapades" (2007, 355) that were documented by the couple through various photographs and videos. It may actually come as a shock to many that they could indulge in sexual activities in such a place. We can, furthermore, revisit Freud to understand this behavior of taking pleasure in the pain of others. In a text entitled "A Child is Being Beaten" Freud argues the fantasy of someone being beaten "is accompanied by a high degree of pleasure" (1995, 185). In *The Experiment*, this is showcased when after the first shakedown Barris is sexually aroused after his commanding part. It can be argued that for Barris the possibility to fully commit himself to his fantasy of empowerment becomes an escape to his dull reality. We see evidence of this when everything is going wrong at the end and he still screams to his fellow test subjects that they are "guards" and must fight the commotion in the "prison," even if all the others are running for their lives, trying to escape the enraged "prisoners" and wishing the experiment to be over. Barris denies it until the end, because he embodied the fantasy and refuses to let it go.

In the scene where Barris coerces Travis to say: "I am a prisoner" he is looking for validation for his own actions, as he utters: "I need²⁰ you to say it for me." It is obvious that degrading the other empowers him and Travis's admission of inferiority somehow substantiates Barris's actions. When Travis finally caves in and mutters, "I am a prisoner" Barris rejoices and says, "Yes, yes 77, that is exactly what you are" (*The Experiment* 2010). Note the use of the pronoun "what" instead of "who," objectifying Travis even beyond the use of the number 77 to address him. This episode evokes one of the Abu Ghraib photos (the "pyramid photographs" mentioned above), where the words "I am a rapeist" were written on a detainee's leg. There is not only a need here to strip someone of their identity, shown by the removing of clothes or shaving of heads, but also the need to give them a new identity, one meant to degrade the inmates while asserting the soldier/guard's position as superior. These new identities are often related

initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time. You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people, you ever heard of emotional release? You ever heard of need to blow some steam off?" ("Limbaugh on torture," n.d).
²⁰ Author's emphasis.

to rape and sexual abuse as a means of affirming authority. In the film we are reminded of the nicknames attributed to, for instance, Manadel al-Jamadi, when Cam Gigandet's character Chase repeatedly harasses a "prisoner," nicknaming him "Moulin Rouge" among other homophobic slurs.

Another scene which deserves attention is the episode when the "guards" decide to shave Travis's head as a cautionary tale for the other "prisoners," followed by Barris's question "do we have a proper respect for authority now?" (*The Experiment* 2010). When Travis gives him an unwanted answer Barris kicks him to the ground and begins to urinate on him, demanding that the others join him, with the purpose of sending a message. This section is quite important when framing the way the behavior is represented, as something primal begins to arise in the participants of the experiment. Inside this dislocated environment Barris was no longer the abused coward who lived with his mother, this persona strengthens him.

At all times Barris reinforces the idea that these are not his rules, and that this is not his will. He states, "I have been given a position. I didn't ask for it" (*The Experiment* 2010). Saying this, better yet, *believing* this, he somehow unburdens himself of his responsibility in the deeds; a thin line, very difficult to discern, is drawn, very close to the culpability of the Military Police. Barris goes on saying "in some ways it would have been easier if I was a prisoner, like you," to which Travis responds by implying that Barris is oblivious to his own behavior; Barris concludes by saying "they [referring to the researchers] know what they are doing" (*The Experiment* 2010). These choices are not innocent in their intent; Barris represents a large portion of soldiers while at the same time he reminds us of the students recruited for the Stanford prison experiment that either trusted or were coerced to rely on the higher chain of command.

It is not only in *The Experiment* can we find examples of gratuitous violence towards the "Other." In a German dramatization of the social experiment *The Third Wave*, called *Die Welle* (2008),²¹ the abrupt shift towards violence and terror through the suggestion of a higher power is also present. Praising the film, Ron Jones (the Professor responsible for *The Third Wave* in California back in the 60's) said:

There was real bravery on the part of the Germans to do this. It wouldn't happen in the US. The film won't even show in the US. We're like ignorant children who don't want to see what's going on. We don't look at racism, or study it. The US has no sense of guilt. We don't think about Dresden or Hiroshima or Iraq. ("Like History," n.d.)

21 *Die Welle*. Directed by Dennis Gansel. Frankfurt: Constantin Film Verleih GmbH, 2008. DVD.

Jones's remark reminds us that *The Experiment* was not released in theaters, and its German counterpart, *Das Experiment*, was. This speaks directly to the different ways that each country deals with the representations of violence portrayed by these media. When the Abu Ghraib photographs were first made public on the television show *60 Minutes*, triggered by Sergeant Joe Darby who came across the photos after asking Corporal Graner if he had any photos of the Iraqi sights, the Bush administration was more worried about preventing the dissemination of the photos than with punishing the culprits. Only when it could not be muzzled anymore, the government had to “grab the bull by the horns” and address the nation on this issue.

Completely ignoring the fact that Corporal Graner received many accolades²² for his work at Abu Ghraib – he was told he was doing a “fine job” and was even encouraged to “continue to perform at this level” (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007) – the Bush administration swiftly stated this to be the work of a few acting on their own, a few “rotten apples,” so to speak. It was labeled “non-authorized sadism” and “animal house on the night shift” (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007).

The U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, placed full responsibility of their actions on the Military Police portrayed on the photos. He stated that the actions of the soldiers were “unacceptable” and “un-American” (“Prison Abuse,” n.d.) and that the Bush administration intended to take any and all actions necessary to find out what happened and would make sure the appropriate steps were taken. The link between these two detention camps cannot be overlooked, for how could the photos of torture in Abu Ghraib show similar procedures to the ones known to be used in Guantánamo Bay, if there was no cooperation between the two? This puts to rest the idea of the torture depicted in the photos being a work of a few deranged individuals. But even if it was, the real issue here is, as Sontag argues, that torture was

systematic. Authorized. Condoned. All acts are done by individuals. The issue is not whether a majority or a minority of Americans performs such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely. (2004, I.)

So, what are the photographs saying about hierarchy? About the way the Military Police opted to represent themselves inside this hierarchy?

²² Marks of acknowledgement.

In an era where vigilance is used as an alternative to punishment, as Foucault explained in *Microphysics of Power*,²³ what the Abu Ghraib photographs show us is that, in a context of war, surveillance is again equated with corporal punishment, at times surpassing it. The photographs were highly polemic and someone had to be blamed for it and penalized, and surely enough the fingers were promptly pointed at the Military Police in the photos; their faces were spread across the evening news. The photographs embarrassed the army, so the army took revenge on the soldiers. This tells us that it is all right to torture but it is not all right to take pictures of it. Karpinski was the only high-ranking official to face significant penalties. General Miller, on the other hand, was promoted to Deputy Commanding General for detainee operations in Iraq, including Abu Ghraib. In 2006 he received the Distinguished Service Medal at the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes. This proves that, as Karpinski said in an interview: "There are no heroes in this story, only people with more or less control" (*Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* 2007). Certainly photographs like the "dominatrix" picture conveyed the fantasy, visually dramatized by the soldiers, of having complete control over the detainees; the soldiers themselves were, in fact, part of a larger hierarchy of humiliation and degradation emblemized by Tier 1 A.

At the violent climax of *The Experiment*, the film offers an unsettling conclusion; the "guards" cower before the riot and try to escape the enraged "prisoners," forcing a reluctant Barris to run away with them. At this point the group of "guards" are desperately trying to pry open the gate and exit to the outside world, ignoring Barris's frantic attempts to unite the group as guards in order to discipline the prisoners, calling out to them "what are you doing? We've got to stand and fight. This is our world, they cannot take it from us!" (*The Experiment* 2010). This statement reveals just how jaded Barris is. He fully embodied the character of a "guard," and realizes his "mission" and his "power" would disintegrate outside the context of the experiment of which he is a part. When the red light goes on, signaling the end of the experiment, the gate slowly opens and the participants appear to awake from a deep sleep, gradually remembering that there is a world outside. They step outside the compound, bruised and bloody, the test subjects just look around and sit on the ground, forgetting the uncontrollable rage that dominated them only moments before.

23 Michael Foucault, *Microfísica do Poder* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal Ltda, 1979).

When a bus arrives to pick them up Barris drops his prison guard belt and begins buttoning up his shirt. This scene suggests an oneiric quality about the experiment: that the participants could have been under a spell inside the makeshift prison and were now fully awake. Or perhaps it could be the other way around, on the outside they lived under a spell of normality, under the illusion of safety, and the experiment woke them up to real life: primal, violent and without mercy.

The members of the Military Police at Abu Ghraib claimed to be performing roles, playing characters: they represented themselves in their “selfies” as if living in works of fiction. Much like the student who embodied John Wayne for his role in the Stanford Prison Experiment, each of the representatives of the Military Police depicted allows his/her own idea of authority, of control, to shine through in the pictures. However, the ways the Military Police chose to represent themselves, posing and gloating, not only tell a story of racial and sexual violence renewed in a neo-colonial context, but are also powerful indicators of the demeaning status of these US citizens, themselves, in a larger and highly exploitative hierarchy of power. By replicating this double source of violence, the film *The Experiment* forces the viewer to confront the abject pyramids of power erected by the “War on Terror.”

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