English 114: Writing Seminars 1
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with
University regulations. —Stephanie K. Lynch

<u>The Camera as Dictator: Photography and Fascism at Abu Ghraib</u>

by Stephanie Lynch

Philosopher Walter Benjamin argued that photography would become a revolutionary

weapon in the fight against elitist Fascism, for unlike other media, it had the power to

democratize. Photographic images were reproducible on a mass scale, so no photo could have the

authority of being an "authentic" piece. Politically, this disenfranchisement of authority

reflected a Marxist view of society wherein all citizens had equal social significance. Yet,

despite Benjamin's claim that photography would prove a revolutionary force in politics, recent

pictures taken at Abu Ghraib prison question the radical quality that the philosopher ascribed to

photography. The distribution of the Abu Ghraib images through print and electronic media may

be an example of putting art in the hands of the masses, but the photographs are not truly the "art

of a classless [and therefore homogenous] society" (Benjamin 218). By amplifying the elitist

cult of violence through imagery, the Abu Ghraib photographs functioned in the sphere of

Fascist art that Benjamin disdained. They do not operate as part of Marxist revolution against

authoritarianism, thanks to both the content of the photos and their function among American

troops.

Although the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib did not heed formal principles of the

documentary genre while snapping away at the camera, their portraits stand together as a

perverted photo essay that records the cultural divide between soldiers and prisoners. Like all

documentary photography, the Abu Ghraib images depict "a symbolic order with cultural

determinants" (Bezner 3). These determinants appear as several motifs of prisoner subjugation: physical restraint, nudity, and blindness. In most snapshots, detainees' hands are roped to bars or their bodies beaten to the ground (Walsh). Unlike in Paul Strand's respectable depiction of pitiful blindness in the well-known portrait *Blind Woman*; the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib have no respect for their subjects' pride. They forcibly cut off the Iraqis' vision. Thrusting blindfolding bags and women's underwear over the detainees' heads, the American soldiers reduced their prisoners to sub-human creatures. Nudity lends a pseudo-animalistic quality to the scenes of bodies stacked upon bodies. By refuting values of liberty and freedom, these corporal restrictions literally corroborate the Americans' Fascist behavior. Stripped and kicked to the ground, the detainees are victims of an American cult of violence.

Although Benjamin heralded photography as "completely useless for the purposes of Fascism" (218), the Abu Ghraib photographs intentionally furthered the aim of a privileged, authoritarian group. The 372nd Military Police Company, the division behind the disturbing snapshots, created them as a form of internal entertainment for the elite group in power. Investigation into the images' sources revealed that at least one soldier's laptop computer stored some of the digital photographs of the abused detainees (Hersh). Although Benjamin argued that the easy reproduction of photographs would break art from its "traditional form," the images' circulation among the soldiers fulfilled a traditional, ritualistic function. In this respect, they belong to Fascist art's "secular cult of beauty," a model identified by Benjamin (220-4). Graphically recording the detainees' humiliation, the Abu Ghraib images lent material foundations to the American soldiers' cult-like fascination with violence. Moreover, the soldiers prevented the release of the Abu Ghraib images to the masses to avoid compromising these sacred objects. Much like art inhabited Benjamin's sacred cathedral to which only a select group

had access, the photos remained hidden in sacred laptops. The Internet compromised the cultic

value and original tradition of the Abu Ghraib photographs by directing them to "the [less

sacred] studio of a lover of art" (221), otherwise known as the public domain.

Those with authority in the prison used the photographic instrument to aestheticize

violence – a tendency that Benjamin identifies as Fascist (242). The soldiers' uncanny

satisfaction within the photographs' frames contrasts sharply with the Iraqis' anguish, creating a

perversion of what Burgess, Enzle, and Morry deem the *photo-bonding effect* – the increased

affinity strangers normally feel towards each other after having been photographed together.

With this photo-bonding effect, "the act of photography constitutes an important social event"

linking one common stranger to another (629-629). However, no sudden kinship was born

between the abused prisoners and the American soldiers when they were photographed together

because the powerless Iraqis were not part of the elite, camera-wielding group. Instead of

inspiring a bonding session between the soldiers and detainees, the camera augmented the rift

between torturer and tortured, leading to "a processing of data in the Fascist sense" (Benjamin

218). Private Lynndie England and specialist Sabrina Harman embody the gung-ho American

mind-set when they stand eerily cavalier next to the bleeding prisoners, knee-high in the "deep

satisfaction of being photographed," and purveyors of their cult's mission (Sontag II). By

mocking the supposed increased affinity that England, Harman, and others should have felt

towards the Iraqis, the Abu Ghraib images question Benjamin's argument that photography

satisfies a contemporary urge to "bring things 'closer' spatially and *humanly* [emphasis added]"

(223). In fact, the camera pushed the Iraqis to the ground and symbolized how far removed they

were from the authoritarian regime of the 372nd Military Police Company.

If the dissemination of the images within the American military perpetuated the *Führerkult* that Benjamin accused of forcing the masses to their knees (241), what about the role of the photographs once they escaped from the Abu Ghraib prison? Mass distribution of photos has the potential to unify disparate groups by inspiring a common understanding among them. However, politically charged images often polarize their audiences. Diverse responses to photographs of the Vietnam War, the first major conflict covered extensively by American photojournalism, encouraged the chaotic fragmentation of the political climate in the United States. Iconic photographs like Nick Ut's *Children Fleeing a Napalm Strike* (1972) were "open to successive reconstruction by and on behalf of varied political interests," and continued distribution of the photograph – the very factor that Benjamin believed would be an antidote to Fascist aesthetics – fueled political dissent (Hariman and Lucaites 38, 49). Digital sharing of the Abu Ghraib images spread equally gruesome scenes throughout America, but the civilian response has been apathetic – far from a powerful, unified, or nation-wide attack on military policy. The scandal was, in Sontag's words, a "public relations disaster" – not an emphatic challenge of Fascist structures (I). The *Führerkult* of the 372nd Company has been chastised, but the torture in Iraq likely continues.

While the American military's primary warning from the Abu Ghraib scandal has been to bar the use of digital cameras in Iraq, a profound message about the photographic medium has emerged from the scandal: photography which aestheticizes violence cannot operate as part of the proletarian revolution that Benjamin desired. At Abu Ghraib, photo-taking reinforced the American soldiers' authoritarian position over the Iraqi detainees. Sadly, few Americans protested this return of art to the sacred cathedral of Fascism. Perhaps the communist revolution

will come in the future; if it does, art's capacity to transform politics will not rest solely upon its

mass reproducibility.

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