

Jon McKenzie

Abu Ghraib and the Society of the Spectacle of the Scaffold

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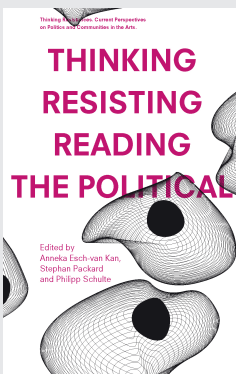
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Zusammenfassung

It is unavoidable, Jon McKenzie argues in this essay, to accept the risks that one might fail to resist and eventually perpetuate violence in one's writing or art. He insists on the necessity to critically engage with the scandalous pictures of torture and prisoner abuses, and think through those practices and their consequences. McKenzie focuses on two anachronisms: following Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life*, he argues that the torture scandals reveal a reemergence of sovereign power that is assigned to investigators and other military personnel; and combining Foucault and Debord, he concludes that the exhibition and staging of torture points to the reemergence of the spectacle of the scaffold. Using theatricality as a way to analyze the techniques of America's torture machine, his close reading of a sequence of pictures of prisoner M-----, who was later given the name "Shit-Boy" by the guards, reveals how closely practices of torture relate to performance. McKenzie particularly stresses the importance of the temporal and processual dimension and traces the construction of the character of "Shit-Boy," and the invention of this trope. This allows McKenzie to bring awareness not only to the violence performed and represented, but also to the violence of representation itself. Connecting his argument to the central theses of his influential book *Perform – or Else. From Discipline to Performance*, he suggests that the way torture has been used in Abu Ghraib closely relates or might even come to define the global formation of power/knowledge, which with reference to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* he calls performance stratum.

Schlagworte

Aktivismus, Gegenwartskunst, Gemeinschaft, Kunst, Politik, Soziale Bewegungen, Widerstand



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Two Anachronisms of the Performance Stratum

The scandal known as “Abu Ghraib” instantiates two political anachronisms that may very well come to define what I call the performance stratum, the global formation of power/knowledge which is currently displacing the disciplinary stratum analyzed by Foucault.² One anachronism, *the reemergence of sovereign power*, involves the expediency of discursive performatives, whether spoken or written. The second anachronism, *the reemergence of the spectacle of the scaffold*, involves the efficacy of spectacle, theatricality, and, more generally, embodied performance. I will very briefly outline the first anachronism with reference to an infamous series of “torture memos,” and then turn to the main object of this essay, an analysis of the theater of torture enacted at Abu Ghraib prison. This theater can be understood, precisely, as a contemporary spectacle of the scaffold.

The first, more discursive, anachronism involves the reappearance of sovereign power, by which I mean the power of sovereign utterances to decide life or death – in a word – to execute. In contrast to discipline’s universal, invisible, and continuous operation, Foucault described sovereign power as organized around a single sovereign body and as exercised through highly individualized, visible, and intermittent techniques. Its anachronistic return today, however, reroutes such sovereignty away from kings and their ministers and instead plugs it directly into the executive management of high performance organizations. In contrast to the plodding deliberations of rationalized bureaucracies, new “petty sovereigns” emerge fully authorized and directed to make decisions based on their expediency – their speed, their fitness to situation, their practicality, even their “actionability.” Thus, in a series of brief memoranda written between January 25 and February 7, 2002, top Bush administration officials summarily declared that Taliban and al-Qaeda combatants were not covered by the Geneva Convention and,

1 This essay previously appeared in Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, eds., *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

2 See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), especially Part II.

in the following August, offered an unprecedented legal definition of torture, one so narrow that, short of death or loss of bodily organ, almost any level of pain and suffering could be justifiably inflicted in the name of the “Global War on Terror.”³ Such official memoranda articulated a (quasi)legal framework for the policies and procedures used in the detention, interrogation, and torture of prisoners at U.S. facilities in Bagram, Afghanistan; Guantánamo, Cuba; and eventually Abu Ghraib, Iraq (to name only the most well-known sites).

These “torture memos,” however, must themselves be placed within a wider political framework, which legal scholars and administration officials call the “unitary executive,” a controversial constitutional theory that vastly broadens executive power and reduces the ability of other governmental branches to provide checks and balances. “Unitary executive” means just that: executive power is unified, not divisible or limitable by anything outside of it. Beyond official memoranda, other means of exercising unitary executive power include public and secret executive orders, classified studies and findings, interpretative signing statements attached to legislation, and even seemingly mundane agency regulations. The power asserted by the theory of unitary executive can be understood in terms of Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception,” in which sovereign decisions suspend the rule of law, even and especially to the point where the exception effectively becomes the rule. Butler explicitly theorizes the sovereign power of the Bush administration in terms of discursive performatives: “The future becomes a lawless future, not anarchical, but given over to the discretionary decisions of a set of designated sovereigns [...] who are beholden to nothing and to no one except the performative power of their own decisions.”⁴ Further, she describes this sovereign power as anachronistic and, significantly, as extending far down into bureaucracies, giving rise to low-level sovereigns. “These are petty sovereigns, unknowing, to a degree, about what work they do, but performing their acts uni-

3 See in particular the memos of Alberto Gonzales to President Bush (“Decision Re: Application of the Geneva Conventions on Prisoners of War to the Conflict with Al Qaeda and the Taliban,” January 25, 2000), George W. Bush (“On the Humane Treatment of al-Qaeda and Taliban Detainees,” February 7, 2002), and Jay S. Bybee to Alberto Gonzales (“Standards of Conduct for Interrogation under 18 U.S.C. §§ 2340–2340A,” August 1, 2002). These and other memos can be found in Mark Daner’s *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2004), a collection of essays, documents, and photographs.

4 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2004), p. 65.

laterally and with enormous consequence.”⁵ I would argue that one must also consider petty, *non-state* decision-makers, such as the executives at Titan and CACI, two private military contractors currently being sued by former Abu Ghraib inmates. Thus I prefer to use the term “executive performativity” rather than “sovereign performativity.” In some sense, executive performativity is an extension of what I have analyzed elsewhere as “high performance management,” but one which suspends long-standing traditions of deliberative, highly rationalized bureaucratic decision-making and violates or suspends laws, contracts, and professional codes of practice, whether governmental or nongovernmental. Executive performativity represents a devolution of sovereign power at the same time as its resurrection in contemporary organizations.

My focus in this essay, again, is a second, closely-related anachronism, a more visceral enactment of power that Abu Ghraib incarnates but in no way exhausts. Alongside the gruesome scenes of Daniel Pearl’s beheading and Saddam Hussein’s hanging; alongside the globally broadcast bombings of Baghdad, Bali, Beirut, London, Manhattan, Tel Aviv, and many other cities; alongside the innumerable websites devoted to images of war carnage, executions, and other forms of political violence – the scenes from Abu Ghraib reanimate that extremely violent and graphic form of political theatricality which Foucault assigned to pre-disciplinary society and which he named “the spectacle of the scaffold.”⁶ Indeed, panopticism, as the visual regime of the enlightened human sciences, is precisely what displaced the visual regime of spectacle associated with sovereign power. The prison cell displaced the scaffold in the public square as the paradigmatic site where power and bodies meet. Today, however, scaffolds may be in cells, city streets, lonely landscapes, almost anywhere: it’s the spectacle that has changed, shifting from highly localized spaces of temporal copresence to globally mediated spaces and times – or rather, all localized spaces of temporal copresence become potential nodes of transmission and reception in a worldwide electronic network of cameras, screens, databases, processors, and editing boards. In short, just as sovereign power has devolved and trickled down to mid- and even low-level officials, the spectacle of the scaffold has become networked and screenal: satellites, televisions, security cameras, facial and gestural recognition software, cell phones, Blackberrys, iPods, YouTube, Google Maps, The Memory Hole – all become means for capturing or

5 Ibid., p. 65.

6 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), especially Chapter 2.

being captivated by spectacles. Combining Foucault and Debord, two unlikely allies, we might say that on the performance stratum this second anachronism portends a *global society of the spectacle of the scaffold* – or global *societies* of the spectacle of the scaffold, as one can foresee such spectacles being deployed not only by fundamentalists, neoliberals, and neoconservatives, but even by those opposed to these social groupings.

One might object that torture and violence – and images of torture and violence – have long existed. In fact, the Abu Ghraib images have themselves been described in terms of late-19th and early 20th-century American lynching photos, Francisco de Goya's "The Disasters of War" prints (1810–20), and even ancient Greek sculpture.⁷ Yet while one can find many historical precedents and analogues to Abu Ghraib (e. g., the racism, amateurism, and indexicality of lynching photos; the context of war and social upheaval surrounding Goya's prints; and the posed, almost sculptural arrangement of figures), what distinguishes the contemporary spectacle of the scaffold is its vast sociotechnical infrastructure. The technical infrastructure of television and the internet is both global and often real-time, on the one hand, and yet also local and even intimate, on the other. The images of the Hooded Man haunt the halls of Abu Ghraib but also the homes of people around the world. The same cell phones and laptops that carry words and pictures of loved ones also transmit anguished cries for help and images of bombing and carnage. And not just one or two images, or even ten or twenty, but hundreds upon hundreds and even thousands upon thousands of images. In the end, this global technical infrastructure decidedly does *not* mark a clean, absolute break from any and all historical precedents and analogues; more profoundly, via multimedia databases and hypertext markup language (html), these historical precedents and analogues are themselves being incorporated into the society of the spectacle of the scaffold. Indeed, this incorporation contributes to its anachronicity.

Abu Ghraib and the Total Theater of Torture

In addition to the general, if not universal, infrastructure of television and internet that supports it, the acts and images of Abu Ghraib are also underwritten by a much more specific sociotechnical infrastructure. Beyond the Bush administration's neoconservative cohort that

7 For an overview of such analyses, see Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

produced the torture memos discussed above, another, longer-standing social paradigm was at work, a paradigm both coldly theoretical and ruthlessly “applied.” I refer here to the paradigm of psychological torture developed by the CIA during the Cold War and used by the U.S. and/or its proxies in Vietnam, the Philippines, Argentina, and other countries. Here we have torture techniques developed and deployed internationally *in the name of democracy* – protecting American democracy, establishing and/or supporting democracy elsewhere, and “securing” democracy worldwide.

Significantly, in his recent book on the CIA’s program of psychological torture, historian Alfred McCoy presents its overall implementation as *a type of theater*:

the psychological component of torture becomes a kind of total theater, a constructed unreality of lies and inversion, in a plot that ends [...] with the victim’s self-betrayal and destruction. To make their artifice of false charges, fabricated news, and mock executions convincing, interrogators often become inspired thespians. The torture chamber itself thus has the theatricality of a set with special lighting, sound effects, props, and backdrop, all designed with a perverse stagecraft to evoke an aura of fear.⁸

McCoy uses theatricality not as a metaphor, but as a robust analytical model. He is not the first to employ such a model to analyze torture and violence. Diana Taylor argues that the performance of torture in Argentina inscribed a nationalist narrative on the bodies of those expelled from the nation. More recently, sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer has analyzed religious terrorism in terms of “theater of terror” and “performance violence.” At work in these analyses is a *certain* theatricality, and I too will use this concept to theorize phenomena far from theater proper. Significantly, the military itself calls its area of operations a “theater,” a usage that dates from the 17th century.⁹ Today, with the Global War on Terror, all the world’s a bloody stage. Within this global theater, there is the Iraqi theater, and within it, the theatrical performativity of Abu Ghraib. Indeed, the military’s own Criminal Investigation Division repeatedly uses the term “staged event” to refer

8 Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 2006), p. 10, emphasis mine. McCoy describes the development of the CIA paradigm of psychological torture in Chapter 2, “Mind Control.”

9 Branislav Jakovljevic, “Theatre of War in the Former Yugoslavia: Event, Script, Actors,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 43: 3 (1999): pp. 5–13.

to incidents at Abu Ghraib where soldiers posed or arranged inmates for viewing and/or photographing.

It is thus no accident that commentators have described the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs as “theatrical:” the poses of Lynndie England; the pyramid of naked inmates; the hooded figure holding electrical wires – these iconic images present tableaux of power and degradation. The performances seem scripted, directed, and enacted for an audience – and indeed they were. By whom and for whom? One only need to look at the casting: specific bodies – Arab, Muslim, and mostly but not entirely, male – were abused by Americans, both male and female, mostly white Euro-American but also African-, Latino-, and Arab-American, who acted under the orders of American commanders and officials. And we must also ask: by what means and to what ends were these bodies tortured? I propose to use theatricality as a way to analyze the techniques of America’s torture machine.

Commentators have proposed many interpretative frames for understanding the events and images of Abu Ghraib: trophy photos shot by frat boys, tourist shots snapped by ugly Americans; porno pics taken by sex-crazed guards. More thoughtfully, Sontag framed them, in part, in terms of lynching photos, while Žižek argues that they document the initiation of Iraqis into the underside of American culture.¹⁰ Art historian Stephen F. Eisenman argues the photos reveal a “pathos formula,” often found in classical Western art, in which tortured individuals appear to sanction their own abuse.¹¹ While multiple frames are no doubt at work, I think the most important one is much more literal: it is the regimen of detention and interrogation instituted at Abu Ghraib at the recommendation of Major General Geoffrey Miller. This is precisely the regimen that McCoy calls “total theater.”

General Miller, then the commander at Guantánamo, inspected Abu Ghraib in September, 2003. Following a summer marked by a sharp spike in insurgent attacks, the military sought better intelligence to counter the insurgency. Miller arrived at Abu Ghraib saying that “he was going to “Gitmoize” the detention operation.”¹² After his inspection, the general filed a detailed report containing specific recommendations. These included the assignment of a Behavioral Science Con-

10 Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *New York Times Magazine* (23 May 2004); Slavoj Žižek, “Between Two Deaths,” *London Review of Books* 26:11 (3 June 2004).

11 Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, p. 16.

12 Brigadier General Janis L. Karpinski, cited in “As Insurgency Grew, So Did Prison Abuse,” *The Washington Post* (10 May 2004).

sultation Team, made up of psychologists and psychiatrists, and the incorporation of information technologies, particularly databases.

It is in the assignment of a Behavioral Science Consultation Team – or BSCT (pronounced “biscuit”) – that we can best approach the theatrical performativity of Abu Ghraib, for it set the stage both in terms of scenes and images and *also the temporal unfolding of events*. While the scenes and images have received much popular and academic attention, their temporal and processual dimension has been largely overlooked. Beneath the spectacle of Abu Ghraib, there was plot, dramatic unfolding, and even character development – or rather, the decomposition of character and identity.

Miller developed and enhanced BSCT interrogation at Guantánamo, drawing on decades of CIA and military research into psychological methods of interrogation. McCoy argues that this research produced a radically new paradigm of torture, one that perversely complements the postwar emergence of human rights institutions. It is a “no touch” torture, a torture that leaves few visible marks on the body, precisely because it targets the mind – or rather, because it targets the mind through bodily sensation and stress, rather than primarily attacking the body through contact, twisting, or puncture. Erroneously called “torture light,” its effects can be far more damaging and long-lasting than physical torture. There is a strong bias against recognizing psychological torture as torture, not only by folks such as Rush Limbaugh, who jokes about Muslims vacationing at “Club Gitmo,” but even by past Congressional investigations into American torture programs. Even the United States’ ratification of the Convention against Torture side-stepped the techniques I am about to describe. Thus the importance of understanding Abu Ghraib as psychological torture, and I believe theatricality provides a crucial lens for analyzing how this paradigm actually works, both spatially and temporally.

Until recently, the CIA’s torture paradigm has consisted of two main methods: sensory disorientation, achieved by sensory deprivation and overload; and self-inflicted pain, such as stress positions and psychological manipulation. McCoy reads one of the iconic Abu Ghraib images precisely through this frame: “That notorious photo of a hooded Iraqi on a box, arms extended and wires to his hands, exposes this covert method. The hood is for sensory deprivation, and the arms are extended for self-inflicted pain.”¹³ The CIA torture paradigm targets the very sense of self and identity. Sensory disorientation techniques, including long periods of silence and darkness or, alternatively, loud

¹³ McCoy, *A Question of Torture*, p. 8.

music and strobe lights, aim to produce fear, a loss of spatial and temporal awareness, and emotional crisis and breakdown. Self-inflicted pain techniques include long periods of standing or squatting; shackling of arms and legs in painful positions, and informing prisoners that they could end the interrogation – simply by telling the truth. The goal here is to make prisoners blame themselves for their suffering.

For McCoy, one reason psychological torture is *total* theater is that it targets all of the senses: hoods, blackened goggles, and strobe lights target vision; earmuffs and loud music target hearing; gloves and mittens target touch; dietary changes target taste; and surgical masks target smell. We can see sensory disorientation at work in an image from Guantánamo released in 2002. It shows a group of orange-clad detainees kneeling in a fenced pen; they wear blackened goggles, earmuffs, wool gloves, and blue surgical masks. And we also see self-inflicted pain: these detainees are not praying, they are in kneeling stress positions. Ankles crossed, backs bent, wearing knitted caps in the Caribbean heat, they may have been forced to kneel for hours at a time.

General Miller's theater of torture actually "perfected" the CIA's psychological paradigm by adding two additional methods: "cultural shock" and the exploitation of individual vulnerabilities.¹⁴ First, "cultural shock," which targets cultural values and sensitivities. McCoy gives this example:

Guantánamo's command began to probe Muslim cultural and sexual sensitivities, using women interrogators to humiliate Arab males. [...] According to a sergeant who served under General Miller, female interrogators regularly removed their [own] shirts and one [smeared] red ink on a detainee's face saying she was menstruating leaving him to "cry like a baby."¹⁵

Other cultural shock techniques include the shaving of hair and beards and the use of dogs to frighten and humiliate. Such techniques were imported and used at Abu Ghraib, as seen in the widely-published image of Lynndie England holding a leashed inmate nicknamed "Gus," taken in October 2003. In the uncropped version of this photo, another MP, Megan Ambuhl, looks on. Compare the scene to this Guantánamo interrogation log from December, 2002, almost a year earlier: "Began teaching the detainee lessons such as stay, come, and bark to elevate his social status up to that of a dog."¹⁶ The Guantánamo detainee,

14 Alfred W. McCoy, interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now* (<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/02/17/1522228>, publ. 17 February 2006, cit. 10 November 2006).

15 McCoy, *A Question of Torture*, pp. 129–130.

16 Ibid., pp. 127–128.

Mohammed al-Kahtani, was also put on a leash and forced to be naked in front of female soldiers.

At Abu Ghraib, the military used cultural shock systematically. Here are extracts from a pamphlet given to Marines in fall 2003 to make them aware of Iraqi cultural sensitivities:¹⁷

Do not shame or humiliate a man in public. Shaming a man will cause him and his family to be anti-Coalition

The most important qualifier for all shame is for a third party to witness the act. If you must do something likely to cause shame, remove the person from view of others.

Shame is given by placing hoods over a detainee's head. Avoid this practice.

Placing a detainee on the ground or putting a foot on him implies you are God. This is one of the worst things we can do.

Arabs consider the following things unclean:

Feet or soles of feet.

Using the bathroom around others. Unlike Marines, who are used to open-air toilets, Arab men will not shower/use the bathroom together.

Bodily fluids (because of this they love tissue paper).¹⁸

As Mark Danner argues, interrogators and guards *inverted* such cultural sensitivity training at Abu Ghraib and reverse-engineered it to maximize shame rather than minimize it.

The other technique developed at Guantánamo was the exploitation of individuals' unique mental and physical vulnerabilities. Such exploitation allows interrogators to target an individual's ego in a highly effective manner, all the better to then erode and break it apart, so that the detainee transfers trust to his captors. As medical ethicist and MD Steven Miles contends, BSCT psychiatrists and psychologists identify vulnerable traits, as do physicians, medics, and nurses.¹⁹ Such information is then conveyed to interrogators and filters down to guards – or may even filter up from guards, who spend long periods observing and handling inmates.

We can see such targeting of vulnerabilities in the nicknames given to Abu Ghraib inmates – nicknames such as “The Claw,” given to Ali

¹⁷ Danner, *Torture and Truth*, p. 19.

¹⁸ “Semper Sensitive: The Marines’ Guide to Arab Culture,” USMC Division Schools. Reprinted in *Harper’s Magazine*. vol. 308, issue 1849 (June 2004), p. 25–6. (<http://www.harpers.org/SemperSensitive.html>, cit. 12 November 2006).

¹⁹ See Steven H. Miles, *Oath Betrayed: Torture, Medical Complicity, and the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2006).

Shalal Qaissi, on account of his deformed left hand. “Shitboy” was the name given to an inmate referred to in records as “M-----.” The military states he was “mentally deranged” and often smeared himself with feces. Military personnel also gave the name “Gilligan” to Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, the inmate in the “The Hooded Man” photograph, presumably naming him after the bumbling TV character. *But how were individual vulnerabilities actually exploited?* “The Claw,” “Shitboy,” and “Gilligan” were no doubt names improvised on the spot by “creative” interrogators or guards and then exploited in subsequent abuses. McCoy writes:

Thespians all, the torturers assume the role of omnipotent inquisitor, using the theatricality of the torture chamber to heighten the victim’s pain and disorientation. Within this script, there is ample room for improvisation. Each interrogator seems to extemporize around a guiding image that becomes imbedded in the victims’ recollection of the event.²⁰

The nicknames, I believe, functioned as guiding images for the performance of psychological torture. We can see how one such guiding image was employed by analyzing a series of images. As graphic as they are, individual photos only give a static impression of the theater of torture. To understand its process *in action*, we must look at a *sequence* of materials.

Violence Performed: “Shitboy”

Analyzing a series of digital images of M-----, the prisoner nicknamed “Shitboy,” we can better understand the theater of torture’s processual dimension. MPs recorded these images over a one-month period, from November 4 – December 2, 2003. Again, the military stresses that M----- was “mentally deranged,” but given that the CIA torture paradigm sought to *produce* mental breakdown, M----- may well have been “deranged” by his treatment. At a minimum, we can see how guards exploited his vulnerabilities by enacting and elaborating the guiding image of “Shitboy” in their performance of torture.

The images of M----- are particularly graphic, as they both *represent violence* and *embody the violence of representation itself*. However, given that the events have been misrecognized as “hazing” antics or the deeds of a few bad apples – and that psychological torture para-

²⁰ McCoy, *A Question of Torture*, pp. 83–84.

digm has been largely ignored, I think we have a responsibility to analyze both the theater of torture and the machine in which it operates. The images analyzed here can be found on Salon.com's "Abu Ghraib File" (www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib), an archive that also includes annotations from the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) and accompanying essays. I should also note here that there may well be other, undocumented scenes of M-----'s torture that occurred before, during, or after those described here.

The first known images of M----- were taken at 1:42 and 1:43 am on November 4, 2003. Two photos show him hanging naked and upside-down from his cell bunk in what appears to be a stress position. His calves stretch across the top bunk; his thighs, torso and head suspend down, supported on the floor by his hands, which rest on what appears to be a folded black cloth. His hands are placed together in a prayer gesture. Photos of other prisoners reveal they were often handcuffed to bunks in stress positions; handcuffs, however, cannot be seen in these images of M-----. According to CID notation of these images: "All investigation indicates he did this of his own free will, this was not a staged event." Already, we must ask what it means to attribute free will to someone who is a) subjected to a regime of psychological torture, and b) alleged to be "mentally deranged"? Yet if we do concede that M----- suspended himself from his bunk, these images also depict a staged event, staged not by MPs or interrogators but by M----- himself. As later images reveal, he is quite aware of the camera's presence and may well have been performing for it.

Because this first scene takes place in M-----'s cell, few other inmates could see him.

One week later, however, a much more public performance unfolded in the cellblock's central corridor, where it was documented by several images, two of which received wide publicity. In these two photos, taken late in the evening of November 12, one again sees M----- naked, but now walking with arms fully extended at the side and head bent back, an obvious stress position. But most disturbing about these images is that M-----'s entire body is covered with feces—head, arms, legs, and torso, front and back. In one photo, we see M----- from behind, walking toward Sergeant Ivan Frederick, who stands clutching a night stick. A second photo, taken moments later, shows M----- from the front, walking in the same manner. Significantly, both photos capture the scene's public nature, for we see the arms and heads of other inmates watching from their cells. M----- is being paraded before his fellow Iraqis and before the camera. How long this incident lasted is unclear, though two other images were taken ten minutes earlier from the cellblock's second floor walkway. These show M----- already cov-

ered with feces, but rather than walking, he kneels before Graner with hands atop his head. To the side stands civilian translator Adel Nakhla of Titan Corporation, no doubt translating Frederick's commands.

Here we see evidence of psychological torture that combines self-inflicted pain (stress position), cultural shaming (public display of nudity and excrement), and the exploitation of individual vulnerability (the targeting of a preexisting psychological disorder). M----- has been forced to kneel before the baton-wielding Graner and then paraded (and no doubt forced to stand for a long period) in full view of fellow Iraqis—all the while completely covered in feces. Indeed, these images may very well depict the initial formation of the "Shitboy" image, around which the MPs and interrogators would construct subsequent abuses. It should be noted that MPs later stated that M----- repeatedly smeared himself with feces, acts taken as symptoms of his mental disorder.

Nine photographs taken the next night demonstrate how long such sessions could last. At 10:04 pm on November 13, Sergeant Ivan Frederick photographed M----- standing with sandbags tied on his arms, placed there either for sensory deprivation or perhaps to prevent him from abusing himself. M----- stands in the corridor at one end of the cellblock, his black prison jumpsuit open and pulled down, exposing his upper torso. *Three and a half hours later*, at 1:39 am on November 14, M----- is photographed again, still standing, but now his arms extend forward with a sandbag on his right arm only. Two minutes later, Specialist Charles Graner photographs M----- with another camera from above on the second floor walkway. M----- is now turned around with arms extended on either side, head tilted back. Two more photos taken moments later by Graner show Frederick and a second MP, Sergeant Javal Davis, who smiles up at the camera. Significantly, these three photos reveal numerous stains on the floor beneath M-----'s bare feet, suggesting that not only has he been standing and turning for some time, but also that he has urinated on himself. (Graner later told Joseph Darby, the MP who would turn the infamous photos over to his superiors, that in regard to his abuses, "The Christian in me knows it's wrong, but the corrections officer in me can't help but love to make a grown man piss himself."²¹) Additional photos taken with Frederick's camera depict further abuses. One shows M----- posed with both arms extended and curled on either side in a position reminiscent of a swan's neck. Another image, a headshot of M----- in profile, reveals something not legible in the other photos: his head has been shaved,

21 "Records Paint Dark Portrait Of Guard," *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16832-2004Jun4.html>, publ. 4 June 2004, cit. 12 November 2006).

except for a band of hair running from one ear to another, creating a sort of transverse Mohawk haircut. Finally, two photos taken at 1:52 and 1:53 am show M----- again wearing two sandbags, only now his arms have been bound tightly together with rope and a padlocked chain. In the final image, Graner stands behind M-----, holding him by the shoulders and grinning directly into the camera, apparently showing off his work.

Again, the temporal dimension of the Abu Ghraib theater of torture is crucial to understanding how the CIA regime of interrogation operates. As the scene just described indicates, detainees may be forced to hold stress positions for hours on end, a fact not captured by the more notorious single images. Intense physical and psychological pain arises not from blows delivered by another, but from sheer exhaustion and prolonged periods of immobility. The goal is to make the detainee blame himself for his suffering. A common outcome is incontinence, leading to self-disgust and, in cases where urination or defecation occurs in a space open to viewing by others, public shame. Both the personal and cultural sense of identity erodes in a highly calculated but gradual process.

We next see how this process unfolded – and also witness the elaboration of the guiding “Shitboy” image – on November 19, two full weeks after the first known images were taken. Two close-up images taken at 2:10 am show M----- lying naked on his right side on a pink foam bed pad, his upper body covered by a dark, stripped blanket. His ankles are bound with white, plastic ties, and in one image, it appears that his wrists are shackled behind him with metal handcuffs. Both images show M----- holding a yellow object; the CID notation reads, “Detainee inserts banana into his rectum on his own.” A third image taken at 2:11 am reveals that these images were taken from the second tier walkway. The Sony camera has been zoomed out, and we see that M----- lies in the central corridor. It appears that his ankle restraints are chained to the bars of a cell door, and a pair of white underwear lies on the floor nearby.

We have here an inversion of the “Shitboy” image: instead of feces coming out of his rectum, M----- has been allowed to insert an object into it – or forced to do so: the trustworthiness of the CID notation is open to question, as it is likely based on testimony given by the very MPs who cuffed and placed M----- in the corridor, provided him with a banana, and then photographed him. The presence of the bedding is significant also. It has probably been dragged out of M-----’s cell along with him, and foam bedding will be used into the next scene of abuse. Thus, we may be witnessing the beginning of its incorporation into the “Shitboy” image.

This next torture scene begins ten days later, on the evening of November 28, and it embodies and then elaborates the “Shitboy” image in an extraordinary way. The first photograph, taken at 8:06 pm, shows M----- from the groin up, standing naked in the shower area of the hard site. M----- stands before a brick wall, the shower plumbing visible to his right. His body is marked with brown splotches. The CID notation reads: “The detainee is covered in what appears to be human feces.” Feces has been smeared on each breast, the belly, the neck, and in the hair. Though M-----’s face has been digitally obscured, it appears that his chin, ears, and the left side of his face are also defiled, thus suggesting that excrement covers his entire face. The next two images, also time-coded at 8:06 pm, again show M----- standing, but now from the ankles up. Feces cover his genitals and inner thighs. M----- wears white surgical gloves whose fingers are covered with excrement. One photo depicts him with both arms at his side; in the other, it appears (again, his face has been digitally obscured) that he has put his right hand in his mouth, the grotesque irony being that M----- is using a hygienic glove to eat feces.

As with the images taken on November 12, these photos taken two weeks later depict the signature image of the “Shitboy” motif: M-----’s body smeared with excrement. One can only speculate how often this tableau was staged on nights not captured by digital cameras, either in secluded spaces such as his cell or the shower, or in open spaces such as cellblock corridors. This night, after again establishing the “Shitboy” motif, the guards will extemporize their performance in an open corridor, using objects previously deployed as props on earlier nights. The next sequence of photos, taken a little more than an hour after the shower images, begin with an image showing a cleaned-up M----- standing in an all-too-familiar pose, with arms fully extended at his side. Now, however, he wears a strange tunic-like costume: on closer inspection, one can see that it is a yellow foam bed mattress that has been folded over his shoulders to cover his body, front and back from the knees up. A slit has been cut in the bed pad’s center, through which M-----’s head sticks out. Around his waist, a chain is being fastened tightly by Graner. Graner wears black gloves, an armored vest over his green T-shirt and camo fatigues. From his belt hang various “dangles”: tools, cables, etc. The next image, taken at 9:13 pm, shows Graner posing beside M-----, leaning on his shoulders with both hands and smiling directly into the camera, as if showing off his improvised work.

Graner’s work had only just begun. The next photo, taken at 9:16 pm, shows Graner kneeling on one knee, his right hand on the back of M-----, who now lies stomach-down on a litter, a cloth stretcher whose

two support poles have small feet which keep the litter a few inches above the floor. The image has all the trappings of a trophy photo: Graner smiles broadly into the camera next to his “game.” M-----, still wearing the foam tunic, lifts his head toward the camera; his face has been digitally blurred, but the head angle suggests that he too looks directly into the camera. We have here an image of abject humiliation and almost total subjection, a point I will turn to in a moment. Before doing so, however, I will note that the background of this photo reveals two remarkable things.

First, in the deep background on the left, there stands a second detainee; hooded with head bent toward the cellblock wall, he wears a smudged white gown and his hands appear to be tied behind his back. M----- thus may not have been the only person tortured this night. But even more significant, also on the left of this image but in the mid-range background, there stands a person holding up a second litter. Unlike Graner, Frederick, and the civilian translator Nadal seen in previous photos, this individual wears civilian clothing: black pants, green shoulder-bag, and bright white sneakers. *Such nonmilitary clothing strongly suggests that this second person was either a CIA interrogator or a privately contracted one.* In short, far from being “prep work” for subsequent interrogation, this entire scene may well have been part of an actual interrogation, if not of M-----, then of the hooded detainee or another person not visible in these photographs. Indeed, though there were special interrogation rooms at Abu Ghraib, Tara McKelvey reports that interrogations could also take place in “a cell, a shower stall, stairwell, or a supply room.”²² Other photos taken at Abu Ghraib have been described as showing “OGA” (i.e., “other government agency,” a euphemism for CIA) personnel interrogating detainees in the open corridors of cellblock 1A.

Whatever the identity of this second person, he or she played an active role in this unfolding theater of torture, for in the next photograph the second litter has been placed on top of M----- to form what the guards called a “litter sandwich.” Sandwiched face down between two litters, wearing foam bedding, chain belt, and arm restraints, M-----’s subjection has literally reached the bottom. The *coup de grâce* comes in the scene’s final image, another trophy photo which depicts a second guard, Ivan Frederick, sitting atop M-----, who now raises his head to the camera. The subjection is now complete, the dominance of guard over prisoner, American over Iraqi, white-skinned over dark-skinned, military order over insurgent force, Good over Evil – all are both

22 See Tara McKelvey, *Monsterring: Inside America’s Policy of Secret Interrogation and Torture in the Terror War* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), p. 14.

allegorized and literalized. To coin a term, all become “litteralized” in the litter sandwich.

Such word play is not inappropriate here, for it may help reveal additional elements and moments in the improvisational development of M-----’s torture via the guiding image of “Shitboy.” To begin with, *litter* read as stretcher can be associated with bed and bedding, in particular, with the foam pad seen here and in the earlier scene with the banana. As noted above, it is as if the bedding has become incorporated into the “Shitboy” theme, and one can imagine the guards joking, “Shitboy has made his bed and now must lie in it.” (Recall, too, that the first images of M----- show him hanging from his cell bunk.) But *litter* can also refer to trash, especially pieces of trash left lying on the ground of public places, and here M----- has been trashed and left on the floor of the prison’s public corridor. Significantly, *litter* is also associated with feces, for the term can refer to absorbent material, such as the dry granules found in cat litter. Here, the litter absorbs “Shitboy” into what might be called a “shit sandwich.” Further, *litter* can refer to the surface layer of a forest floor, made up of decomposing matter such as twigs, leaves, and animals. Such rotting material can obviously be related to excrement. But more tellingly, the precise term *litter sandwich* is used in biology, where it refers to a framed, wire apparatus used to study the decomposition of organic matter in soil strata.

Taken together, the photographs taken from all the scenes analyzed here strongly suggest that M-----’s identity becomes decomposed into the image of “Shitboy.” Again, such decomposition or breakdown of subjectivity is precisely the goal of psychological torture, a process that the month-long series of images just described documents with the methodical cruelty of an all-too-serious and all-too-prolonged sick joke, one in which sadistic humor is put to “intelligent” ends, those of military and national security intelligence. As one of the military whistleblowers, Sergeant Sam Provance, later recalled about the guards at Abu Ghraib, “They’d talk about their experience when the detainees were being humiliated and abused. It was always a joke story. It was like, ‘Ha, ha. It was hilarious. You had to be there.’”²³

One final document, a set of video clips taken the night of December 1, offers bone-chilling evidence of the effectiveness of psychological torture. M----- himself performs the final act of this particular theater of torture, though we would be more accurate saying that M----- “is performed” by this theater, for the agency of his actions now includes the Army, CIA, and Titan Corporation – or the torture machine itself. The

23 Provance, quoted by McKelvey, *Monstering*, p. 17.

performance was recorded on Graner's video camera, presumably by Graner. The Salon archive contains ten separate 15-second video clips and one 8-second clip of M-----, for a total of 2 minutes, 38 seconds. However, CID notation states that video was taken between 9:29 and 9:45 pm, so the events recorded unfolded for half an hour; moreover, additional still images of the same event are time-coded as occurring early on the morning of December 2 at 12:33 and 2:00 am, indicating that the torture lasted *at least four and a half hours*. This material, along with two other sets of video clips of other detainees – one of the infamous pyramid and group masturbation scenes – remains largely unknown in the U.S., where to my knowledge they have never been publicly broadcast (portions of them were broadcast in Australia). The clips on Salon.com are low resolution QuickTime movies and, significantly, their audio has been dropped out. No doubt full video and audio versions exist but have not been leaked to the public.

I will describe the video clips in the order posted on Salon.com, noting also that the file names suggest that other clips may exist. The first five clips of M----- were shot from the upper tier, peering down into the corridor below. In the first two clips, we see M----- from his left standing in profile, bent over at the waist with his head against a solid cell door. He wears a blanket of some sort. At first glance, it appears M----- may be praying, as his body rocks slightly, but on closer inspection we see that his wrists are handcuffed to the door before him. The next three clips reveal the horror of M-----'s performance: standing upright from his bent position, he leans back, still rocking his body slightly forward and backward. He then turns his head in the camera's direction and appears to look directly into the lens. Turning his head back, M----- extends his arms out and shifts his body weight back, bowing his body slightly at the waist. Seeming to take aim, he suddenly pulls hard on the handcuffs and slams the top of his head into the solid metal door. The blanket slips down, exposing his bare shoulders as his knees buckle. In the next clip, M----- appears dazed and shaken, his body shuddering as his head bends up and down. In the fifth clip, M----- prepares for another impact, standing and rocking, turning his head toward the camera, leaning back and again slamming his head into the door.

Again, CID notation indicates that the "self induced" actions captured on video lasted half an hour. The final six clips again record M-----'s ritualistic banging of his head into the metal cell door, only now the cameraperson has moved down to the cellblock floor. In the first of these clips, we see M----- standing full length in profile, but now in a mid-range shot taken from his right side. He wears sandals, and we can see that his blanket bears a large blue floral pattern. From this

angle and distance, we more fully sense the force of his head hitting the door, twice within a 15-second span: the rhythm of his impacts has increased and once again he turns his head briefly toward the camera. The next, 8-second clip starts from the same angle, but M----- now squats on his feet, balled up and teetering no doubt after another head-slamming. The camera then moves quickly toward and behind M-----, the lens pointing toward the concrete floor, the bars of several other cell doors, and the cameraperson's walking feet. The next two clips, each 15 seconds long, show M----- closer up from his left side, waist to head in three-quarter view. In one clip, we see M----- standing before the door, whose green surface we now see is marked with two bright bloody spots, one where his head hits the door, the other where he rests his head while bent over at the waist. The second of these two clips shows M----- again slamming into the door. In the tenth and final video clip, the camera towers over M-----, who squats below. Solarized lens flares give the image a dark red hue, then a light green one, as M----- squats and rocks, tilts his head back, and then stands up again. He again looks into the camera and we see that the right side of his forehead is bloody and raw. M----- grimaces, and he appears to be crying and/or crying out.

Taken together, all of these materials demonstrate that Abu Ghraib's theatrical performativity was not limited to poses and images, settings and props. The total theater of torture also operates via a temporal, processual dimension that has been largely ignored by commentators; however, this dimension is crucial to understanding the underlying regime of psychological torture and interrogation at work in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. M----- was subjected to over a month of painful and humiliating abuse in sessions sometimes lasting several hours each. The photographs and videos clearly demonstrate that military personnel (and possibly CIA personnel and/or private military contractors) employed this regime's four main components on the detainee: sensory deprivation, self-inflicted pain, cultural shock, and the targeting of individual vulnerabilities. With respect to the latter, I have tried to show that "Shitboy," beyond its function as a nickname for M-----, also served as a *topos* upon which his captor improvised and developed a highly individualized yet highly public performance designed to decompose his subjectivity. Bodily organs and gestures, as well as specific objects, entered into the processual development of the "Shitboy" *topos*, effectively driving a wedge between M-----'s corporeal and psychosocial sense of self. Even if he was mentally unstable before his capture, guards and interrogators spent weeks exploiting his vulnerabilities, both in isolation and, more often, in public. In the end, the question of whether his pain was self-inflicted or not is irresolvable

and even irrelevant: his performance was both scripted and improvised by guards and interrogators within a codified theater of torture designed to produce self-inflicted pain as a means of breaking down his identity.

Coda: Media Shock and Counterperformativity

The CID report on Abu Ghraib also indicates that M---- was not a “high value” prisoner, meaning that he was not thought to possess valuable information, in which case guards likely used his serial abuse in order to intimidate other prisoners, in both live and recorded performances. Now given the widespread use of media, not only at Abu Ghraib, but reportedly also at Bagram and Guantánamo, I believe that media forms a fifth element of the CIA’s paradigm of psychological torture, one we might call “media shock.” Spectacular abuses perpetrated in isolated cells or rooms targeted the psyche of the prisoner in question. But inmates also report being repeatedly photographed and then told that humiliating images would be shown to family and friends if they did not cooperate. Recall here the Marine Corps brochure’s comments about shaming Iraqis in front of others. And, indeed, the majority of known photographed abuses occurred in the central corridor before the eyes of other inmates, who were themselves shamed and intimidated by being forced to watch – and to watch American men and women take photographs and videos of the abuses. In addition, guards reportedly used such photos as screen savers and openly displayed them on prison walls where inmates could see them, effectively telling them that “this can happen to you.” In short, the force of theatrical performativity at Abu Ghraib, including media shock, first of all struck the inmates, as both objects and viewers of torture. The public scandal then communicated that force around the world.

The spectacle of the scaffold thus returns both in the cells and corridors of Abu Ghraib and other sites, and through television, computer, and other media networks, by which it reaches a global audience. But in between the local and global audiences, the performative force of the spectacle was radically transformed.

This transformative process began on January 13, 2004, when Graner handed Specialist Joseph M. Darby two CDs containing hundreds of images. Disturbed by what he saw on the CD, Darby turned over the images to CID, and they soon became central to “Article 15–6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade,” a.k.a. the “Taguba Report,” which was initiated in late January. By April, a selection of images had been leaked both to CBS and to reporter Seymour Hersh and then sub-

sequently made public by *60 Minutes II* and *The New Yorker*, unleashing the images' performative force around the world. But a strange, yet hopeful, thing happened in this globalization, something that began with whistle-blower Darby's reaction: the performative force of the spectacle inverted and turned on itself. Reframed and publicized by CBS and Hersh, the poles of Good and Evil reversed, as it were, and the persons shamed in the images became England, Frederick, and Granger, and beyond, the U.S. military and, further still, the United States itself. This profound reversal was captured in a political cartoon that appeared soon after the scandal broke. Composed by Tim Menee of *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the cartoon depicts Uncle Sam standing atop a cardboard box with wires attached to his fingers and wearing a black hood and robe; next to him are scrawled the words "UTTER HUMILIATION." Other cartoons – published in the U.S. and abroad – expressed a similar sentiment, using Uncle Sam or other figures associated with the U.S., such as the Statue of Liberty or Lady Justice.

Such reversibility of performative force can be understood in terms of what Butler has called "queering," "resignification," and, following Brecht, "refunctioning." Similarly, Donald MacKenzie, a noted sociologist of science and technology, has recently found that certain economic models, after initial performative success in making reality conform to them, may eventually "alter economic processes so that they conform less well to the theory or model" and may even lead to economic crisis. MacKenzie calls this possibility "counterperformativity,"²⁴ and while he focuses on economic models, one can extend this concept to potentially *any* model or theory. Indeed, McCoy's study of the CIA model of psychological torture argues that its use by the Philippine military on suspected Communist insurgents in the 1970s and 1980s helped create a group of egomaniacal officers who later tried to overthrow the very government (that of Ferdinand Marcos) on whose behalf they had originally tortured people.²⁵ In the Iraqi theater of war, the counterperformativity of CIA torture techniques includes the creation of more rather than less insurgency, the production of useless rather than useful intelligence, and the generation of psychic violence not only on

24 See Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 19. MacKenzie's primary case study is the 1998 hedge fund crisis associated with Long Term Capital Management (LTCM), a firm that had deployed an economic model known as "Black-Scholes," first to make and then to lose billions of dollars. MacKenzie develops a sophisticated model of performativity, of which "counterperformativity" is one component.

25 See McCoy, *A Question of Torture*, chapter 2.

torture victims but also on the torturers themselves. In this light, the images of torture at Abu Ghraib may have even helped, counterperformatively, to produce in the U.S. public what Eisenman calls “the Abu Ghraib effect,” that is, “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.”²⁶ In other words: in the name of morality, (some) Americans blinded themselves to morality.

There is a lesson here about violence performed, violence analyzed, violence cited and incited. One could protest that the very analysis attempted above – a detailed performance analysis of the images of M-----’s torture – could itself contribute to the systematic violence it seeks to critique, could perpetuate the media shock rather than counter it, could contribute to the society of the spectacle of the scaffold rather than warn against it. Similarly, one could protest that political and/or artistic protests against Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and Bagram (for instance, protest marchers dressed in black hoods and orange jumpsuits, the performances of interrogation by Coco Fusco or Fassih Keiso, certain graffiti and installation work by Banksy, the film *The Road to Guantanamo* by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross – all of which can be read as counterperformatives of the CIA torture paradigm), could themselves incite further torture. Such risks are unavoidable, given that the iterability of any and all performances and performatives insures both their possible misfiring *and* their possible success, their very performativity and counterperformativity. No amount of interpretative framing or historical contextualization can ward off such citationality, as framing and contextualization themselves entail citation networks. One could, alternatively, simply withdraw and refuse to cite the violence, whether in words or in images – but that is precisely the move made and encouraged by the Bush administration, which has fought the release of images, as well as further inquiries that would investigate the chain of command and potentially connect torture images to torture memos, theatrical performativity to executive performativity. In an age of global performativities, of performative powers operating on both local and global scales, what is needed is more connecting, citing, and critiquing of violence performed, not less, and countering the spectacle of the scaffold and the theater of torture may well depend on counterperformative spectacle and theater. The risks of producing them are great, but the risks of not doing so are greater still.

²⁶ Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, p. 9.