Regarding Representations and Responsibility:

A Study of Torture's Situation and Reception in post-9/11 U.S. Culture

by

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For victims of torture and illegal rendition around the world, and for those who stand up against inhumanity and injustice—
that they not be forgotten.
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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to answer the ostensibly “simple” question of why the United States citizenry did not collectively confront or oppose the use of torture by U.S. operatives in the War on Terror. Considering representations of torture as both culturally informed and culture-informing vehicles for understanding the normative context and political framework that facilitated and sanctioned torture’s use in the War—and as mediums by which citizens know and form judgments about the act—I examine the theoretical representations of torture in liberal humanism and utilitarianism, the seemingly mimetic photographic images taken at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and the fantastically premised epic productions of network television’s 24 and the blockbuster films Casino Royale and The Dark Knight. After tracing the ways in which torture functions in these cultural forms, I reflect on the relationship between civic participation and culture formation in the post-9/11 era in attempt to position citizens vis-à-vis responsibility.

In the first chapter, I locate an “expected and appropriate” response to torture within the human rights and liberal democratic mores of the United States and the international legal regime to which it belongs: a response understood as aversion to the act and public disavowal of its use via civic participation. After examining the theoretical tenets on which this response is premised, I demonstrate how contradictions within the system of liberal humanism governing the United States facilitated claims of a state of exception after September 11th, thereby undermining the legitimacy of dissent and expectation of political accountability.

In the second chapter, I consider the photographs of torture and abuse taken at Abu Ghraib and various factors governing their production and public reception. My analysis highlights the photographic medium’s capacity for becoming a site of violence, the attitudes of pain falsification depicted in the Abu Ghraib images, and the parallel between the photographs and violent iconography in Western art. I argue that atrocity images demand careful attention from viewers to the contextual narratives and invisible power structures in which they are situated. Though such images are anticipated by liberal humanism to elicit feelings of outrage that spur political change, I contend that this expectation disregards the distance the photographic medium instills between viewers and victims. The chapter concludes with a comment on the significance of mediatization and panopticism to U.S. culture.

In the third chapter, I examine three epic film productions that respond to the milieu of fear and disillusionment permeating the U.S. post-9/11 by offering heroes who effectively assuage audiences’ anxieties: the television program 24, the James Bond film Casino Royale, and the Batman film The Dark Knight. These productions are underwritten by fantastic premises that are often obscured by the films’ topical relevancy and formal realism. I consider how this phenomenon enables the fantastically premised torture scenes and hero figures in these productions to intervene into reality. To highlight the ease with which underlying premises can be overlooked, my discussion of epics is prefaced with analysis of the ticking time bomb scenario as a fantastically premised theoretical representation of torture that is treated as a realistic possibility by post-9/11 culture.

In the final chapter, I argue that considering their enmeshment in relational power networks and participation in socio-political normative contexts, U.S. citizens are mutually responsible for the use of torture in the War on Terror. I advocate public encouragement of comprehensive inquiry into the Bush administration’s illicit policies to deter violations of law by future administrations, and conclude by urging increased attention to the means by which our culture production and consumption govern the nation—and thereby influence the world.
## CONTENTS

Short Titles..............................................................................................i  
Introduction..........................................................................................1  

**Chapter One. Theoretical Representation: Torture and the Liberal Humanist Tradition**........6  
I. The Origins of Human Rights..........................................................6  
II. Contradictions of Liberal Humanism and the Advent of the State of Exception..............14  
III. Liberal Humanist Representation of Torture: *The Body in Pain*..............................21  

**Chapter Two. Photography at Abu Ghraib: Mimetic Representations and Violence**.....27  
I. The Abu Ghraib Photographs............................................................30  
II. Complicating the Story: Specialist Sabrina Harman.................................37  
III. The Images as Icons........................................................................41  
IV. On Photography..............................................................................43  
V. On the Smiles..................................................................................49  
VI. Social Memory and Violent Images....................................................51  
VII. On Images and Accountability.........................................................54  

**Chapter Three. Torture and the Fantastic: Epics and the American Identity**............59  
I. The Fantasy of the Ticking Time Bomb.............................................66  
II. Jack Bauer: The American Hero.......................................................72  
III. The Name’s Bond. James Bond.......................................................82  
IV. Batman and the Rule of Law: *The Dark Knight*...................................93  

**Chapter Four. Torture and Responsibility: Toward a Tenable Accountability**.........102  
I. Enlightened Hypocrisy......................................................................105  
II. The Bush Administration’s Dirty Hands............................................108  
III. The State of Exception and (Lack of) Accountability...........................112  
IV. Responsibility in the Era of Obama..................................................115  
V. Mutual Culpability. Or, Toward a Conclusion......................................120  

Appendix...............................................................................................122  
Works Cited and Consulted......................................................................125
Short Titles


Introduction

It all started with what seemed a simple enough question: why, upon learning of torture use by United States operatives in the War on Terror, why did the American public not cry out for a comprehensive investigation?—in 2004, when the news broke about Abu Ghraib, or at any other juncture over the past five years, when circumstantial evidence pointed toward an executive-level sanction of systematic torture use in the War. Why did the American people never clamor to Congress or the Bush administration for a public disclosure of the origins, extent, and frequency of torture use? Why did not I?

When I saw the photographs of U.S. military police officers abusing and torturing their prisoners at Abu Ghraib, I was appalled and angry. I was embarrassed, for belonging to a political community capable of acting in such a way. I strongly believed that the photographs depicted injustice. And I felt guilty—because despite my fierce aversion to the events depicted in the photographs, I did not write my Congressman, join Amnesty International, or write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. I felt guilty because, despite my disgust, I did not take political action.

Over two hundred years worth of human rights and liberal humanist discourse had convinced me that when a citizen dissents with the state’s actions or witnesses injustice, the appropriate response is civic action; and that the generation of enough dissent eventually would lead to policy change. Thus, widespread dissent and subsequent policy change were the response and effect that I expected to follow the scandal at Abu Ghraib and a number of other illicit power
abuses in the War on Terror.1 Yet the state was confronted with no such collective public response.

Of course, some individuals did respond. There are courageous stories of prosecutors at Guantanamo Bay who symbolically resigned their posts, Department of Justice attorneys dismissed for objecting to the Bush administration’s policies, and average citizens who religiously wrote their legislators and called the White House. I do not mean to disregard these individuals nor minimize their integrity and highly commendable actions. Rather, what I want to make explicit is that there has never been concerted public engagement with the issue of torture in the War on Terror, despite torture’s continuous presence in the media. This thesis is thus an attempt to better understand the absence of a collective response—as well as an inquiry into both my personal reaction to the Abu Ghraib scandal and the dearth of robust anti-torture initiatives at the policy level, which widespread public outcry would presumably provoke. Though months of critical attention to the questions have not produced a certain answer, I offer the following four chapters as a reflection on civic participation and culture formation in the post-9/11 era.

In this thesis, I have drawn upon many methodologies and cultural forms, for the question of why the U.S. citizenry did not actively confront or oppose the use of torture concerns issues ranging from problems of political disengagement to the nature of the mediums by which we receive cultural messages. Torture itself is innately an unrepresentable act. No medium could possibly impart to audiences or viewers the utter immediacy of the pain inflicted upon the torture victim, the ways in which the victim’s very subjectivity is destroyed, nor the subtle consequences, for the torturer, of exacting such pain. Yet because torture is something which fortunately few U.S. citizens have experienced, we are nonetheless dependent on representations of the act to provide the information necessary for us to imagine, understand, and form judgments about it. For this reason, bearing unrepresentability always in mind, I have made representations of torture the nucleus of my study—arguing that such representations are mutually constitutive with cultural attitudes about the act, and serve as sites that comment on social perceptions and consciousness of it.

After organizing several well-known representations of torture in post-9/11 U.S. culture into the loose categories of “theoretical,” “mimetic,” and “fantastic,” this thesis gives careful consideration to the theoretical representations of torture in liberal humanism and utilitarianism,2 the seemingly mimetic photographic images taken at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and the fantastically premised epic productions of network television’s 24 and the blockbuster films Casino Royale and The Dark Knight. The representations under scrutiny are either highly popular or ubiquitous in U.S. culture, and, consequently, have been broadcast in various capacities across the globe. In considering these works, it should not be forgotten that American culture is unquestionably hegemonic: the images, television programs, and films we distribute internationally are a type of “soft power” that projects and thereby maintains our attitudes and

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1 Momentum for policy charge regarding social and civil rights issues requires a broad base of social and electoral support. During the civil rights movement, for example, this support began with the acts of a few individuals and the progressive Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. It took over a decade, however, for the movement to gain the necessary social momentum to precipitate substantial policy changes, which came in the form of the 1964 Civil Rights Act; only after Congress passed this act was change enforceable or supported by the government in a manner that could reconstitute social relations. Because legislative politics are so often governed by micro-level attempts to garner constituent, national party, and peer support, legislative policymakers have little incentive to involve themselves in controversial policy changes, such as those involving human rights issues, without a widespread public clamor for change. Even with such support, it is difficult to garner enough votes to pass these initiatives.

2 To preclude confusion, I should make it clear that these two traditions are discussed in different chapters: liberal humanist representations in chapter one and utilitarian ones in chapter three.
values—convincing other publics that prestige results from voluntarily embracing our mores.

The United States' capacity to produce and disseminate ideas, images, and films that permeate and are esteemed around the globe is thus a tacit statement about the nation's position on the world stage (121).

To preclude confusion, I want to clarify my definitions and classifications of representations. By “theoretical representation,” I mean a philosophic tradition’s consideration of the act of torture in relation to its definitions of human nature, civic participation, and political action; my study is concerned chiefly with torture’s situation within both the liberal humanist tradition governing the United States' foundational documents and a utilitarian system of thought. The label “mimetic representation” refers to a medium that seemingly imitates or replicates the torture act, and my focus is primarily photography. “Fantastic representation” I understand to signify an imaginatively constructed narrative not entirely rooted in reality; in particular, I am interested in television and film productions premised on fanciful or implausible assumptions.

A few additional caveats: this thesis insists that a nation’s normative contexts matter; that a social body with a collective memory, identity, and imagination, exists; and that, as Edward Said noted, culture is “not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses” and uses to differentiate the self from the other.

Culture in this thesis refers to a milieu constructed not only by socio-political elites who propagate messages and attitudes from Hollywood or Washington D.C., but also by the active, and often unconscious, participation of individual citizens, as they form preferences, discuss topical events, engage the press, and establish consumer habits.

Finally, I want to make clear that this thesis is not meant to be an exhortation for readers to feel personal guilt vis-à-vis the use of torture in the War on Terror. Rather, it is an exhortation toward more careful consideration of the reasons why citizens think that they are or are not guilty. As Timothy Kaufman-Osborn has pointed out, gratuitous blanket claims for collective American guilt only elicit “the cheap gratification that accompanies politically-correct hand wringing, [and are] a sorry substitute for the work of careful thinking about collective accountability.” Accordingly, the work of the following four chapters should be understood as an attempt to situate the U.S. public in relation to the act of torture and to trace the complicated matrixes of agency and responsibility that surround its use.

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3 Byungju Shin and Gon Nankung, “Films and Cultural Hegemony: American Hegemony ‘Outside’ and ‘Inside’ The 007 Movie Series,” Asian Perspective 32, no. 3 (2008): 115, 120. For this reason, there is an inherent symbiosis between the U.S. government and the U.S. television/film industry. As the government helps the film industry to maintain global dominance, the industry projects American values and promotes maintenance of the status quo (139); because Hollywood is chiefly concerned with audience enjoyment and entertainment, it creates films that respond to audience desires—thereby reinforcing the attitudes and values underlying them. Just as most U.S. citizens experience torture via the mediation of representations, many foreign populations experience U.S. culture through the broadcast of American films.


5 Timothy Kaufman-Osborn, “‘We are all torturers now’: Accountability After Abu Ghraib,” Theory & Event 11, no. 2 (2008), under “Liberal Legalism and Accountability,” http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v011/11.2.kaufman-osborn.html.
Chapter One. Theoretical Representation: Torture and the Liberal Humanist Tradition

I would like to begin with closer scrutiny of the response I expected and felt was appropriate to answer the exposure of the use of torture in the War on Terror—a response that could be loosely defined as civic engagement with political institutions via channels constitutionally established for public expression of outrage. From where did such an expectation come? What does it presume? Is it indeed an appropriate and efficacious reaction for U.S. citizens inhabiting a post-9/11 era?

This chapter attempts to address these questions by locating my expectation in the human rights and liberal democratic principles of the liberal humanist, or Enlightenment, tradition. After examining how liberal humanism, as an antecedent to both the United States’ foundational documents and the contemporary international legal regime, understands the world, humankind, civic participation, and torture, I will consider the tradition’s permutation after September 11th. As will be demonstrated, the tenets of liberal humanism can neither wholly explain the act of torture in the context of the war nor can they be perceived as the system governing the United States post-9/11. Rather, during the period from late 2001 to early 2009, the philosophic tradition’s internal contradictions facilitated claims of a state of exception that undermined the legitimacy of dissent and expectation of political accountability.

I. The Origins of Human Rights

The human rights tradition is securely rooted in Enlightenment thought: it emerges from the concept that all human beings share claim on certain immutable necessities for life, liberty, and happiness. This grounding premise that humankind is a “single moral collectivity” has long been embedded in Western thought—present in both the Christian and classical traditions.6

Long before the Enlightenment, the ancient world had already made space for concepts of universality and uniformity within the normative context of imperialism, which spread Roman customs across first the Mediterranean basin and then Europe at large (64-67). Later, the Pauline doctrine, which rose to prominence during the inchoate stages of Christianity, also appealed to a human commonality that transcended ethnic lines. St. Paul’s teachings on evangelism and universalism subsequently became bedrocks of Christian thought as the religion evolved and spread.7

When Platonic and Christian thought merged during the Renaissance, and universal absolutes became increasingly acknowledged as compatible with Christian teaching, the concept of a common humanity simultaneously became more secularized, more accessible to non-Christian audiences, and thus more capable of actually becoming universal (103). The Enlightenment generated a system of thought premised on the common nature of rational, autonomous human beings endowed with immutable dignity and basic equality. Known in various contexts as liberalism, humanism, and Enlightenment thought, this philosophic system assumed the existence of a human “uniformity in keeping with [contemporaneous] assumptions of physics regarding the natural world”—and worked to uncover and underscore both the science of nature and the science of humanity.8

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7 For an example of St. Paul’s call to universality see Ephesians 2:19.
8 John Headley explains Grotius’s stance: “[N]atural law, the established rational order of things, would pertain and prevail, even if God and his providence did not exist...If rights are derivative from natural law, natural law is itself derivative from human nature in its sociableness” (Headley 111).
Modern liberal democracy is predicated on such notions, employing the principle of a common humanity as the origin of governance by popular sovereignty. In governments ruled by popular sovereignty, citizens are responsible for holding their leadership responsible to the systematized rule of law. The constitutional texts governing these states declare civic participation a duty of the citizenry; they delineate appropriate channels by which citizens can voice their opinions, and they institute mechanisms by which political power can be checked (Kaufman-Osborn). Liberal democracy thus requires citizens to be public individuals “who set aside their ‘private’ selves [or identifications] in order to acknowledge that what they possess in common, i.e., their mutual culpability, is of greater salience to their identities than those dimensions which divide them from one another” (9).

Hugo Grotius is largely credited with secularizing the concept of a common humanity. Writing in the early 17th century, he argued that natural law could exist without God because it derived from the human being’s natural propensity for rationality and social relations (111). Grotius’s contemporary, Thomas Hobbes, further advanced the notion, by establishing its source as a natural equality between individuals, and by contending that natural law was not supernal but derivative of the human condition. Subsequent intellectuals seized upon these arguments for “a basic equality inhering to the human condition” (114). The concept can be traced from Hobbes through John Locke’s two treatises, in which Locke asserts that natural rights exist prior to natural law and initiate it—thereby affirming Hobbes’s assertion that natural law is objective oriented (for self-preservation) rather than transcendental. The end of Locke’s career saw natural law reconstituted from a prenatural concept to a political theory that would be later translated into the American and French declarations (134).

Several other developments were important to the evolution of this liberal humanist system of thought. One was Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s contention that all sentient beings in their natural state have an “aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or suffer, especially if it is of our [species].” Another was articulation of Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative,” which declares that humans, as rational beings, cannot merely be used as means to an end; according to Kant, actions as well as objectives must adhere to the universal laws governing humanity. Still another development was the late Enlightenment’s expansion of theories regarding universal humanity into world expansion and panopticism—a phenomenon Headley has described as “[t]he insatiable curiosity, the restlessness, the drive, to reduce the entire planet to a complete knowledge” (Headley 143). In this way, philosophical trends toward increasing knowledge and extending inclusiveness were applied to technological, economic, and geopolitical exploits, in a manner that aroused desire for exploration and enlargement of empire.

Working to render the world knowable, and thereby conquer nature’s chaos by human industry, liberal humanist principles consequently extended their reach in tandem with Europe’s ability to transverse the globe, disseminate its culture and forge imperialist ties. The mutually reinforcing nature of these developments is not surprising, for any universal principle is intended

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9 Hobbes inverted Grotius’s relationship between natural rights and natural law, humankind and society, contending that the human’s inborn condition is socialness and his natural propensity is immense fear that encourages war against all. This “natural condition of mankind” is ruled by a *jus naturale* (natural right) of self-preservation, from which are derived *lex naturale* (natural laws) that advise creation of an artificial social body. In other words, Hobbes reconstitutes natural law as a natural right, and alters *lex naturale* from transcendental laws to precepts for self-preservation.


12 The era’s belief in the all-powerful reach of science and man’s ability to conquer nature through panoptic seeing and knowing are perfectly illustrated by Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*.
to spread. Johann Herder, discerning their correlation in the nineteenth century, described the desire to know and control the world as a common human enterprise: “Man, while he continues man, will not cease from wandering over his planet...Curiosity, and the insatiable desire of wealth, fame, discovery, and increase of strength...will impel him...To him the Earth is given; and he will not desist, till it is wholly his own.”

It does not seem surprising that judicial use of torture was abolished across continental Europe during this same period, since the tenets of liberal humanism are seemingly antithetical to the cruelty and destruction of humanity at work in the torture act. Yet the spread of Enlightenment ideals, though historically considered a potent catalyst of abolition, cannot entirely claim credit for torture’s prohibition. Rather, disestablishment of torture resulted from modifications to the penal system in the 16th and 17th centuries that decreased torture’s importance to the judicial system. Increased prosperity and education across Europe during this period altered the nature of common legal infractions from crimes of passion to those involving property, and consequently, the penal code became less exacting—eliminating capital punishment and reducing the burden of proof required for conviction (Langbein 97). Such changes shifted reliance away from torture, which had functioned as a means for extracting confessions in cases warranting corporal punishment or death; instead, confronted with less serious crimes, torture decreasingly served a necessary juridical function, and the penal system gradually established circumstantial evidence and incarceralism in its place. Decrees abolishing torture in the eighteenth century can thus be understood as largely symbolic acts that enabled rulers to purport to enlightenment without requiring them to change much in their policies (Langbein 98-99).

In short, the liberal humanist philosophy that rose to prominence during the Enlightenment period witnessed the rejection of torture in continental Europe as it concomitantly promoted an ideology founded on the equal rights and common dignity of humankind. The tradition’s privileging of equality encouraged institution of a democratic government, predicated on both popular sovereignty that protects individual rights and civic participation that generates collective accountability for government action. Populations that disregarded or were ignorant of such practices were (and often continue to be) deemed backward and barbarous, while antithetical acts like cruelty, inhumane treatment, and torture, were (and often continue to be) represented by the tradition as vestiges of tyranny and despotism. The U.S. Constitution, written during the Enlightenment’s denouement, accordingly expresses disgust with acts that force individuals into collusion, abridge the individual’s life or liberty, or serve as cruel or unusual punishment; it effectively outlaws torture in the 5th and 14th amendments.

The international legal texts in effect today are indirect descendants of such American and French rights documents, and were translated into law after the Second World War. Concerned with the nature of human subjectivity, they protect the human being’s right to voice, so that one is able not only to tell one’s own story, but also to control representations of one’s self. Joseph Slaughter explains: “The freedom of speech, the liberty to tell one’s story, [the first article of the accord] is precisely what the following thirty articles of the Universal

15 Previously, the burden of proof had been a convict’s confession (acceptable if given under torture) and two eye-witnesses.
17 The 5th amendment was written in 1791; the 14th was not added 1868. Torture is also banned in Title 18, chapter 113C of the U.S. domestic law code.
Declaration attempt to ensure through prohibitions of abuses that tend to destroy the human voice—"negative rights"—and through promotions of social welfare that tend both to encourage and to foster the human voice speaking itself—"positive rights"" (415-416).

The contemporary human rights regime thus extends the Enlightenment's attention to equality and common humanity, i.e. civil and political rights, so as to guarantee economic and social ones as well, and it considers the person an individual bearing not only rights but also duties (Slaughter, Human Rights, Inc. 131). This new age of human rights law bans torture in several documents to which the United States is a signing party.

Yet liberal humanism has not only inspired the structure of government in many states and the composition of the contemporary international human rights regime, but has also continued to shape the civic and ethical attitudes of individuals since the Enlightenment. For this reason, the tradition's ideological legacy is more significant than even its function as a historical determinant. While the philosophic tradition has never accurately represented reality for most human beings, it nonetheless has always provided ideals to which adherents cling and toward which they endeavor. As mentioned above, liberal humanist tenets have consistently served as a measuring stick enabling individual self-definition and separation from others who do not espouse "enlightenment"; they have been widely drawn upon to adjudicate and regulate various human exchanges ever since their induction into philosophic discourse. Within the context of this ideology premised on equality and human dignity, the idea of torturing an individual helpless to defend himself naturally seems execrable: destruction of a torture victim's subjective agency via assault that forces collusion renders the victim a falsification of the liberal ideal of an active, engaged individual with control over his world (Luban 1433). In this way, the tradition has encouraged ideological aversion to torture just as it facilitated the inscription of torture prohibition on constitutional and legal documents.

My expectation that the revelation of torture would mobilize the U.S. citizenry can be understood as a direct byproduct of this ideology; expectation of a public outcry and feelings of guilt for not speaking out were predicated on a belief in the common humanity and equal dignity of all human beings, and in governments ruled by the will of their people. In short, the liberal humanist tradition had led me to presume that dissent against torture was possible via political channels and would be efficacious, as well as that the United States government would operate according to the precepts delineated in its founding documents—when these assumptions do not necessarily always hold in praxis. Indeed, events since 9/11 have suggested that neither the U.S. government nor its citizenry upholds all tenets of the liberal humanist tradition consistently.

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19 Slaughter further explains, "While civil and political rights might be the first guarantees for the right to narration, economic and social rights become important for understanding that an individual requires fair wages and safe working conditions to tell her story. The right to narration is not merely the right to tell one's story; it is the right to control representation" (430).

20 Sanford Levinson, "Contemplating Torture," in Torture: A Collection, ed. Sanford Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23. See also Alex Bellamy, "No Pain, No Gain? Torture and Ethics in the War on Terror," International Affairs 82, no. 1 (2006). The legal texts prohibiting torture include, but are not limited to, article 5 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions; the General Assembly of the United Nations 1955 Declaration Against Torture, which established torture as a crime against humanity; the 1977 American Convention of Human Rights; and the 1984 United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment of Punishment, which includes a "no exceptions" clause.

21 It seems that such demarcations between "progressive" and "backward," which inherently suggest a type of moral "development," work always in tandem with material development. Increased material prosperity often means closer interactions with Western nations and positive judgments by their governments and business interests alike; while accruing Western values in this manner, material prosperity also enables citizens of such nations to feel secure enough in their livelihoods to work actively to claim unrealized rights. See Ronald Inglehart, Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

22 See also Alex Bellamy, "No Pain, No Gain? Torture and Ethics in the War on Terror," International Affairs 82, no. 1 (2006): 29-130.
greater evil. It seems there is a hole in the absolute prohibition on torture when the act is presented with the specific objective of saving the lives of others; divorced in this manner from cruelty, terror, power and punishment, a moral objective seemingly renders torture palatable and even necessary. Luban contends that in such cases it often dawns on reluctant liberals that the torturer’s goal of forestalling greater evils is one that liberals share. [Information-gathering] seems like a rational motivation, far removed from cruelty and power-lust…Thus, even though absolute prohibition remains liberalism’s primary teaching about torture, and the basic liberal stance is empathy for the torture victim, a more permissive stance remains an unspoken possibility, the Achilles’ heel of absolute prohibitions. (Luban 1439)

Luban terms this exception the “liberal ideology of torture,” which has become familiar in contemporary political and cultural discourses: it is at the heart of the infamous “ticking time bomb” scenario that dominates the current torture debate and is characterized by a torturer who acts to prevent a greater catastrophe. It is not until the security needs of a state assume a position of supreme importance, however, that the liberal exception reveals itself in this way. Consequently, liberalism’s absolute prohibition generally stands firm until moments of fear or exigency suddenly (and conveniently) reveal cracks in its foundations. In chapter three, I examine the specious arguments and spurious assumptions undergirding the ticking time bomb; for now, it is enough to notice that the scenario envisions the possibility of torture within a liberal humanist tradition that simultaneously seeks to destroy it.

The relationship between the War on Terror and international law has also demonstrated fissures in the system’s legal codification. For example, as Judith Butler has pointed out, as the Geneva Conventions presuppose a human community composed of rational and autonomous
subjects conceived primarily according to an Enlightenment model, it also presumes the systematization of the world according to a Westphalian model of nation states—another invention of the period. These prerequisites speak uneasily to the contemporary situation of global war involving non-state actors. The privileging of military-based state actors inherent to the Conventions was readily exploited by the Bush administration’s legal team, which claimed that their prisoners were “detainees” and “unlawful combatants,” rather than prisoners of war, because the individuals did not belong to the “High Contracting Parties” (or recognizable nation-states with “regular armed forces”) specified by the accords.25 The administration was thus able to justify its refusal to apply the accord to detainees using the document’s own vocabulary; though the Conventions do not legally bear such a reading,26 their essential favoring of conventional war and nation states has been exploited in such a way as to seem legitimate without careful scrutiny.

The Bush administration’s maltreatment of prisoners in the War on Terror has established that, despite their claim to immutability and universality, human rights in praxis are closely coupled with state citizenship. Hannah Arendt once wrote that human rights in practice are the positive rights of citizens, rather than the natural rights of individuals; that when individuals are no longer treated as citizens, they often are also denied natural rights:

If a human being loses his political status, he should, according to the implications of the inborn and inalienable rights of man, come under exactly the situation for which the declaration of such general rights provided. Actually, the opposite is the case. It seems that a man who is nothing but a man [i.e. not a citizen] has lost the very qualities which made it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man.27

Without inclusion in a state from which one can derive legal personhood, the individual has little capacity for claiming or protecting his rights against divestment by others. In practice then, despite assertions of universal equality, some individuals inevitably become more equal than others, with more ownership of rights than others—unless states actively protect the equal rights of their people. Merely attributing every human being with individuality, social voice, social mobility, and liability, in theoretical or legal discourse does not mean that all individuals share equal claim on such rights in praxis (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 12).28 Like liberal humanism writ large, human rights are above all an ideology that, as Joseph Slaughter has pointed out, personifies the person by ascribing to humankind characteristics the individual may not in reality possess. The ideal legal “person” in this way serves as a projection and vehicle for achieving an ideological objective, while the actual person may be left behind if his or her rights are not actively enforced (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 20).

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26 Even this argument over “high contracting parties” was spurious, however, because, as Butler points out, “the Geneva accord on POWs is explicit that the term ‘POWs’ includes those who belong to ‘regular armed forces who profess allegiance to a government or an authority not recognized by the Detaining Power.’ In other words, the detaining power, in this case the United States, may not recognize the authority to which these prisoners profess allegiance, but that should have no bearing on their status. Any doubts about that status are to be settled by a competent tribunal convened under the terms of the accord” (Butler).
28 It is also worth noting that the rights in question are specifically human, and thus the association of those different from us with animals initiates a divestment of their rights—or an assertion that they never had claim on rights in the first place—and enables us to distance ourselves from them. As Richard Rorty comments, “We think of Serbs or Nazis as animals, because ravenous beasts of prey are animals. We think of Muslims or Jews being herded into concentration camps as animals, because cattle are animals. Neither sort of animal is very much like us, and there seems no point in human beings getting involved in quarrels between animals.” Richard Rorty, Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 168.
Manipulating these contradictions within the liberal humanist system of law and governance, using American legal texts and liberal humanist principles as a front for consolidation of power in the presidency, the United States for much of the past seven years has been a state of exception what Giorgio Agamben describes as a state functioning in the liminal region between politics and public law, military and civilian rule—or a phenomenon of “legal civil war.” The state of exception operates outside of institutional and legal documents; its exception to the rule of law is predicated on the concept of state emergency. Authority thus derives from exigency, and results in “unaccountable prerogative power” and all-compromising recourse to heightened security (1-2). The United States’ post-9/11 shift into a state of exception can be observed most visibly in October 2001’s Patriot Act, which expanded the executive’s sanction for surveillance, search, and seizure, and in President Bush’s Military Order of November 13, 2001, which authorized “indefinite detentions” and trials by “military commission” rather than tribunal—and consequently divested individuals of their legal personhood (3). These measures, justified by the emergency of war, provided the administration latitude to move outside the rule of law and engage in practices like domestic wire-tapping, extraordinary rendition, and torture.

A crack in the structure of our liberal democracy, the U.S. state of exception arises “in the dialectic between the powers of the president and those of Congress” delineated in Article 1 of the Constitution; the article allows suspension of habeas corpus in extreme circumstances that challenge public safety, but does not specify whether Congress or the president has authority to declare this suspension. The state of exception is also facilitated by the tension caused by Congressional power to declare war while the president serves as Commander in Chief (19-20). During times of fear and vulnerability, these ambiguities can be exploited to the extent that the citizenry will relinquish rights—particularly equality, freedom, and dignity—in exchange for heightened security. During the resulting state of exception, both domestic and international arenas become susceptible to conflation of rule of law with executive discretion.

Manipulating aporias in the structure of liberal humanist thought (such as the ticking time bomb scenario), as well as flaws in international law and difficulties in enforcing human rights, the post-9/11 state of exception was able to disregard domestic mechanisms for accountability, dissent, and rule of law—traditional methods for checking arbitrary power and promoting responsibility in the liberal humanist tradition. The Bush administration squelched internal dissent against its policies in domestic agencies and the military via employee dismissals and censure. It also discouraged dissent in the public domain by keeping civic protestors out of the media’s eye and polluting the channels by which dissent could reach high-ranking officials; in particular, it sequestered opposition away from the president.

It is thus not surprising that in states of exception like the one governing the United States post-9/11 it becomes difficult for citizens to respond to rights violations in the “expected and

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30 The WWI era was characterized by states of exceptions around the world, which extended after the war in Germany and France due to economic situations; Hitler took power during one such state, in which parliament had been dissolved for years. During WWI, President Wilson was greatly empowered by Congress, and during this period established strict prohibition of sedition. During the Great Depression, President Roosevelt assumed extraordinary power to control the economy of the country. Then, during WWII, the President was granted the power to intern Japanese-Americans during another such state of exception (Agamben 12-22).

appropriate” manner outlined by liberal humanism—not least because such outrages are the theoretical tradition’s own shadow self. As Nathan Gorelick explains,

Extraordinary rendition, torture, the war on terror and the security of the state are...nodal points within the larger epistemology of liberal humanism—a humanism that produces [such] dark chambers in its flight from the black void at its own core... It would therefore be misguided to assume that the violence endemic to the war on terror can be cured by simply exposing its contradictions.

(Gorelick, under “Literature Beyond Ethics”)

Manifestation of the inevitable disparity between ideals and politics in praxis, between legal constructs and reality, human rights violations are the underbelly of an ideological system premised on rationality, equality, and panopticism; and they are often forced into obscurity. Merely revealing these contradictions inherent to our liberal humanist tradition or the manner in which its tenets can serve as fronts for illicit conduct—as public disclosure of torture use in the War on Terror has in many ways—is irrelevant if the concealment processes remain necessary for the tradition to function. Unless the ideological premises impelling rights violations (in tandem with rights protections) are understood as determinative agents and critically evaluated by a public desirous of ameliorating the state’s behavior, revelation of the contradictions of liberal humanism is inefficacious.

Consolidation of power within a state of exception makes this kind of confrontation difficult; the very establishment of a state of exception presupposes a general public’s forfeit and disregard of rights in exchange for security. Accepting as justification the “emergency situation” promulgated by the state, many citizens in the post-9/11 era did not respond to violations of their own rights or the rights of others. Those who did, however, were constrained by constriction of

the channels designated for citizen-state exchanges. In such circumstances, when the tradition of “expected responses” becomes inhibited by exceptions that obstruct channels for civic participation or dissent, and when the capacity for civic enactment of change becomes threatened, what are citizens’ options? Are they rendered impotent? Should they act within the broken system or outside it? As the following three chapters explore post-9/11 civic detachment more fully, such questions of and constraints on citizen participation should be born in mind, for when an epistemological structure like liberal humanism stands in disarray, individuals have a tendency to feel themselves impotent and in social crisis.

III. The Liberal Humanist Representation of Torture: The Body in Pain

Elaine Scarry’s seminal work, The Body in Pain, is a paradigmatic example both of how the liberal humanist tradition understands torture as barbarous and inhumane and what it contributes ideologically to our understanding of the act. Although theoretical representations cannot account for the complexities surrounding and nuances within actual cases of torture, Scarry nonetheless offers a careful study of the way that torture destroys the victim’s subjectivity. She describes the act as one structured by three phases, in which the torturer first inflicts physical pain upon a victim, then objectifies that pain in a manner that negates or disregards it, and finally translates the pain into power for himself or his regime.32 Using torture instruments and interrogation and intimidation tactics to create a spectacle of power and fear, the torturer “unmakes” the victim’s world by converting ordinary objects and institutions into seemingly foreign mechanisms for the purpose of producing pain. Essential to her understanding is the torturer’s falsification and denial of the victim’s pain: “only this final act of self-blinding

permits the shift back to the first step, the inflicting of still more pain, for to allow the reality of the other’s suffering to enter his own consciousness would immediately compel him to stop the torture" (56)

Scarry’s work helpfully outlines the ways in which the torturer relies upon appropriation of social conventions and norms to upend the reality of the victim, and upon verbal and visual rhetorical figures to “unmake” the victim’s world. Visual rhetorical devices—tactics that create a spectacle, reinforce the torturer’s agency and victim’s helplessness, and metonymically or symbolically generate fear—establish the power disparity between torturer and victim. Simultaneously, verbal rhetorical figures like hyperbolic expression, irony, and continuous repetition, work to diametrically reverse the assumptions that shape the victim’s reality, so that previous meanings and understandings of the world no longer hold true. Most importantly, Scarry contends that even the most intimate elements of a victim’s world—his or her loved ones, hopes and dreams, religious, political, or social causes—are betrayed or forgotten amidst the pain and fear of its infliction that define the torture act and reduce the entire world to the realm of the victim’s body.

By rhetorical figures, I mean actions and speech that reify the power disparity between torturer and victim: hyperbolic expressions, metonymic treatment of the torture tools or the victim’s body, irony, continuous repetition, conflation of the imperative, declarative and interrogative modes, and reliance on exclamations. For example, the torturer’s repetitious shouts that the victim “knows” what the torturer wants to know, or that the victim is this or that pejorative category of individual; inflicting pain on parts of the victim’s body to signify greater pain or death or the destruction of the victim’s subjectivity; hyperbolic exaggeration of reality outside of the torture chamber through statements that all of the victims peers have capitulated, that he is the only one left, that his cause is doomed; treatment of the victim as if he were the whole body against which the torturer is acting (Scarry 29).

Such inversions or upending of convention are at the heart of the learned helplessness torture technique, in which the destruction of the order in the victim’s world renders him helpless and dependent on his captors.

Scarry notes that one reversal that “unmakes” the victim’s world is inversion of the international laws and legal norms outlined above. While legal norms traditionally study evidence “that may lead to punishment, the [torturer] uses punishment to generate evidence” or to produce false substantiation of previous assertions or assumptions (41). The act of torture thus manipulates and inverts the ground rules of legal thought the victim expects to govern the behavior of captors, at least in states that pay lip service to Enlightenment traditions. In her understanding, interrogation and viable information-gathering are never the genuine motives for state-sanctioned torture. Writing at a time when the U.S. was not publicly perceived to be practicing the act, she highlights the reasons torture is typically hated by liberalism, and acknowledges the tendency for various objectives to be conflated in torture’s use—essentially denying the validity of what David Luban calls the “liberal ideology of torture” (28). The impetus of her world-destruction argument discards the notion that anything a torture victim says is useful, and thereby tacitly disavows that liberal democracies could justify torture used for purposes of garnering intelligence.

Scarry argues that the institution of medicine is similarly inverted: intended to make the body more healthful, medicine is perverted out of the torture act into a mechanism for harming the body or healing it only so that the torturer may continue causing pain (42). Still another inversion occurs within the institution of language, as the words of both torturer and victim move toward grunts and moans, signifiers are detached from the signified, and ordinary terms like "Crucifixion" become "torture."
“telephone,” “dance,” or “tea-party,” come to refer to the torture act (43-44). Even commonplace domestic objects (Scarry mentions chairs, radios, walls, and bathtubs) are divorced from their ordinary functions and appropriated for the creation of pain.

The Body in Pain pivots upon the argument that one human being could never consciously inflict the pain of torture upon the body of another, and therefore that the torturer must falsify and deny the victim’s pain in order to execute the act.\(^3\) This insistence that the torturer must be blind to his victim’s suffering appears at first glance to be belied by the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib, which display American prison guards posing and grinning ostentatiously beside their suffering prisoners. The photographs will be considered in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now it is enough to notice that the guards’ affectations, grins, and very acts of taking the pictures, all seem to suggest a self-conscious desire to document for trophy rather than witness. A cursory look at these images thus seems to refute Scarry’s contention that humans are averse to watching or inflicting pain on others, because the photographs appear to depict individuals in unsettling espousal of the pain of others.

However, closer scrutiny of the Abu Ghraib photographs reveals the very falsification and denial of pain of which Scarry writes: for they depict torturers who are seemingly cognizant of the consequences of their actions reflecting attitudes of justification. The number and postures of torturers in the photographs, and passivity of their onlookers, suggest a general normalization of the torture act and internalization of an epistemology that justifies it. In short, they intimate that use of torture at Abu Ghraib was facilitated by a systematization that

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\(^3\) This nomenclature was used in Brazil, Argentina and Greece. Notably, this same process of linguistic manipulation has been permeating the language (especially legal) in the United States during the War on Terror.

\(^4\) This assumption is premised on Rousseau’s contention in A Discourse on Inequality that before the introduction of reason and social constructs the human being has a “natural aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or suffer, especially if it is of our kind” (Rousseau 70).

trivialized its ramifications and a normative context that viewed prisoners in a manner that diminished their humanity.

While pain negation and denial are more readily understood when they occur at an executive level and are espoused by those who make policy decisions but do not directly witness the implications of their decisions, the processes are more difficult to accept at the level of individuals with proximity to the ramifications of their actions.\(^4\) It seems fair to assume that the tenet of common humanity would inhibit such cruel behavior in individuals socialized to uphold, or at least respect, the liberal humanist ideology—at least unless some other socialized attitude replaced or challenged it. In cases where individuals engage directly in cruelty like torture, Scarry and the liberal humanist tradition would expect the existence of some normative apparatus facilitating falsification of the victim’s humanity. With regard to Abu Ghraib, this normative apparatus might be understood as cultural difference between U.S. guards and Iraqi prisoners; divergence in religion and degree of observance of Enlightenment principles—precipitated by the general collapse of all that is Islamic, Arab, or even Eastern, into terrorism—might be construed as a fundamental and internalized differentiator that promoted the guards’ divestment of their Iraqi prisoners’ common humanity.

Racism and otherization can therefore serve as vehicles for disregarding the pain of others: rendering the pain of the victim unequal to what we would feel in their place, because they are fundamentally different from us. Normative contexts that justify or condone the self-conscious embrace of another’s suffering in this way are in many respects antithetical to liberal humanist principles of common humanity. Yet the Enlightenment project of world expansion

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\(^4\) Denial undoubtedly occurred at an executive level in the Bush administration, both through overt denials of U.S. use of torture and through redefinition of terms like “abuse” and “detainee” (which will be discussed in the final chapter).
and its use of liberal humanist principles as a measuring stick have arguably consolidated a
Western epistemology founded upon notions of identity informed by and contingent on
differentiation from those outside this system—a discrimination that primes the resulting
“others” to become future victims. In this way, liberal humanism again reveals itself as
principally a theoretical construct, rather than a historical actuality: the ideology premised on
common humanity contains risk of its own falsification. The Abu Ghraib images, despite their
production by and representation of guards socialized in the liberal humanist tradition, allude to
the fact, intimating the existence of something within the “enlightened” U.S. soldiers that
“remains radically other,” primal, and cruel (Gorelick, under “Conclusion: The Excess of
Responsibility”).

Chapter 2. Photography at Abu Ghraib: Mimetic Representations and Violence
As Jacques Derrida pointed out in his interviews for Philosophy in a Time of Terror:
Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, media coverage of the September 11th
attacks was fundamentally a common interest for both Al Qaeda and the United States. Through circulation of the shocking images of the collapsing Twin Towers, Al Qaeda was able
to convey its message, to establish the fear and terror that were its objective; at the same time, it
is through images of the event that the United States was able to proclaim its injury, to rally its
citizens together as a nation, and to garner support for a military response. The perpetrators
and their victims who died in the September 11th attacks were some of the only human beings
who never saw these ubiquitous images.

Images are central to our experience of the War on Terror—and to our experience of
many events that occur in distant or secret locales, of which we have no first hand knowledge. In such cases, we rely on the camera to mediate the world for us by peering into arenas that many
of us would or could not enter. Images thus become the building blocks of our imagination; they
allow us to imagine beyond what we have seen. As we use them to construct our realities and

41 Similarly self-conscious acts of violence or brutality are depicted in souvenir lynching
photographs taken in the South between the 1880s and the 1930s, in the apparatuses of torture
employed by Apartheid South Africa, in Nazi controlled Europe, and in Russia under Stalin—to
name just a few in the last century.

279.
43 Derrida: “Maximum media coverage was in the common interest of...the terrorists and those
who, in the name of the victims, wanted to declare ‘war on terrorism,’” and for this reason,
American culture saw exposure and exploitation of “the image of this terror by the target itself.”
Giovanni Boradori, Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and
Terror: Derrida’s Auto-immunity,” 279.
44 It is worth noting quickly some of the other images, besides those from Abu Ghraib, that have
become central to the War on Terror at large: the image of the terrorist, “a figure of exaggerated
power and fantastic mutability, not to mention radical evil—a perfect foil to the equally radical
goodness of its self-appointed opponents” (Mitchell, “Picturing Terror: Derrida’s
Autoimmunity” 278); the image of the decimated Twin Towers; Saddam Hussein’s execution;
American soldiers’ bodies being sent home in caskets; dusty uniformed men and women,
trudging alongside a convoy; the aestheticized body of the “falling man.”
imaginations, we are subsequently constrained by the internal catalog of images we have accumulated and how we can change or manipulate them.\(^{45}\) Stephen Eisenman has pointed out that just as images shape our personal imaginations, identities and realities, they also inform social ones, so that "repetition of acts of mimetic inscription by artists and writers—and vicariously by viewers and readers—in incorporates into our bodies ancient habits and expressions."\(^{46}\) As we produce and consume images, they become incorporated into our collective consciousness and thereby influence our thoughts and actions.

Because torture is one experience that few U.S. citizens have encountered, we are dependent on representations of the act to provide the information necessary for us to imagine, recognize, understand, and form judgments about the act—whether those representations attempt to be mimetic, like documentary photographs, or offer fabricated and fantastic representations that associate torture with other worlds. In post-9/11 America, mimetic representations of torture, mostly in the form of images, are a crucial means by which we have learned about torture use in the War on Terror. Publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs in 2004 was how the nation first learned that U.S. operatives were engaging in illicit treatment of prisoners: the dissemination of these incriminating images forced the Bush administration into acknowledging the practices.

Media circulation of representations like the Abu Ghraib photographs can position such images as "agenda-setters," or visual cues that frame our social awareness and prioritization of issues; frequent viewing of sets of images can influence the importance we assign to them and their message as we form our preferences and opinions. In this way, like the "news" carried by the media, images may focus our attention on issues of which we might otherwise have been ignorant or negligent. As they provide information, however, images inerorably frame it with a slant that may well inform viewers' attitudes or prime them for particular responses. Often, the ubiquity of salient images causes their iconography to become incorporated into our habits and expressions in a manner that causes certain iconographic motifs to become familiar to viewers' consciousnesses and subliminally evoked by particular situations or settings.

Despite the inevitability of such influential nuances within images, and despite the advent and ease of digital photo editing, photographic images retain a singular status as authoritative evidence—a vestige of the belief that the camera, in its capacity to capture a moment, "does not lie." As W.J.T. Mitchell has pointed out,

one connotation always present in the photograph is that it is a pure denotation; that is simply what it means to recognize it as a photograph rather than some other sort of image. Conversely, the denotation of a photograph, what we take it to represent, is never free from what we take it to mean.\(^{47}\)

The essence of this paradox is that even while photography is ascribed a measure of veracity, the intervention of the photographer and viewer in the very processes of creation and interpretation render photographic images presentations—or messages with tacit arguments. The ostensibly imitative quality of the photograph is always conflated with what the photographer and viewer want an image to mean. Concomitantly, the photographic process objectifies the historical moment "captured" by the photograph, in a manner that fundamentally obscures the broader narrative context to which the moment belongs and the invisible power-structures in which it is situated, thereby constraining the potential viewer's capacity to judge the moment's original

\(^{45}\) Even when we personally experience events, photographs can serve as counter-memories, because they block true memory of what occurred and replace it with representation. Michael Fried, "Barthes's Punctum," Critical Inquiry 31, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 556.


significance. Photographs of torture thus conjoin two difficulties: the paradoxical nature of the photographic medium on the one hand, and the impossibility of representing torture and its contextual situation on the other.

Images of atrocities like torture, as depictions of human suffering, are closely embroiled with the concept of “expected response.” Liberal humanism would anticipate such images to elicit outrage, disgust, or pity, on the part of the viewer—the “natural” and appropriate responses to seeing violence and pain. The argument follows that if these images produce strong negative sentiments in enough people, the public will be stimulated to take action. As I have already noted, in the case of the Abu Ghraib images, the latter did not occur. While I did feel outrage, disgust, and pity at the sight of the photographs, and others presumably did as well, neither the public nor I were stimulated into action. This chapter will demonstrate that an expectation that images could initiate political change disregards both the number of atrocity images in U.S. culture and the limitations of the photographic medium. After examining mimetic images as the primary means by which the public has access to torture vis-à-vis the War on Terror, the situation of photography at the site of the violence depicted in the images, and the otherizing ideology legible within them, the following pages will suggest that the Abu Ghraib photographs mask and divorce viewers from the invisible power structures surrounding the events they depict.

I. The Abu Ghraib Photographs

The now infamous Abu Ghraib photograph collection comprises images and video footage taken at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq between October and December 2003. Captured by numerous military personnel, the images depict abusive and often illegal guard-detainee interactions, some of which amount to torture. After months in the hands of government investigators, their leakage to the press and public dissemination began April 28, 2004, with the airing of CBS’s “60 Minutes II” and an expose by The New Yorker’s Seymour Hersh, which was published a few days later.

Considering the secrecy and suppression of dissent that characterized the apparatus of the state of exception governing the U.S. post-9/11, the events that transpired at Abu Ghraib likely would not have reached the public eye without the anonymous leak to the press—although several military investigations had probed into the events that transpired at the prison. The photographic medium, opposed to the military’s written reports and verbal testimonies by military operatives, offered visually incontrovertible evidence, which, in a culture of virulently spread images, could not be easily suppressed. On April 30th, in attempt to mitigate the political maelstrom, and with an election looming only a few months away, President Bush responded to the images by stating, “I share a deep disgust that those prisoners were treated the way they were treated...Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people.” The administration, desiring to maintain the image of benevolence with which it entered the War in Iraq, quickly assured the press and international audiences that the behavior depicted in the photographs was aberrant to mainstream U.S. military culture, contending that the images represented only the misbehavior of a few “bad apple” soldiers. Nonetheless, the release of the photographs has, over the intervening five years, provoked both the media and other branches of


government to be more attentive to procedures at U.S. detention facilities, from Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay to Bagram and secret “black site” facilities around the globe. It is common comment on the nature of the state of exception governing the United States post-9/11 that substantive information about the events that transpired at Abu Ghraib, and about the torture apparatus operating in the War on Terror writ large, has been slow to surface. Increased attention to torture by the media, Congress, and the legal system has been similarly slow; their attention should not be misperceived as policy changes or public outcry, but rather as attempts to check the Bush administration’s ever-expanding power of executive and the political milieu of acquiescence.

By the fall the photographs were taken, President Bush had already declared the War in Iraq a success. Many of the prisoners (POWs) captured by the United States’ during the war had been released in mid-summer 2003. By fall, those prisoners still in U.S. custody had been labeled “security detainees,” ostensibly because the war was now officially over; as the United States no longer considered detainees to fall into the POW category—a consequence of their status as non-state actors, who could be classified as extralegal individuals through manipulation of international law—the prisoners were deemed exempt from the rights granted POWs under the Geneva Conventions. For this reason, military officials believed they could detain them indefinitely. The rights ideologically ascribed to prisoners of the War on Terror had thus been destroyed; detainees were placed at the mercy of executive discretion.

During the fall of 2003, Abu Ghraib prison, located approximately twenty miles west of Baghdad, was the most attacked U.S. base in Iraq. It was overcrowded; at one point the ratio of guards to prisoners fell as low as 450:7,000. Resources were in short supply, and the general setting was grim, as the military’s unpreparedness for dealing with the power vacuum and Iraqi insurgency resulting from the war’s “end” was becoming dismally clear. Fear of being caught in a sniper attack or injured by mortars on prison grounds was very real, and life inside the detention facility was difficult for guards and prisoners alike.

Abu Ghraib’s inmate population at this time encompassed a myriad of groups, from “security detainees” under the command of Military Intelligence and Iraqis accused by friends of terrorist activity to individuals picked up by the Iraqi Police and family members of those sought after by the military—including their wives and children. The infamous photographs document acts that occurred in the Military Intelligence cellblock of the “hard site,” in Tiers 1A and 1B, where “high value detainees” under the jurisdiction of Military intelligence were housed (Gourevitch and Morris). The guards stationed in Tiers 1A and 1B were reservists from the 372nd Military Police (MP) Company; they were combat operatives, trained in reconnaissance, raiding, and patrolling, but never instructed in interrogation or interrogation procedures. The 372nd had never been exposed to the Geneva Conventions, nor were they given standard operating procedures for the treatment of their wards. Instead, they were ordered to relay on the commands of the Military Intelligence officers working in their respective cellblocks (Gourevitch and Morris).

The duties of the 372nd revolved around preparing prisoners for interrogation. Soldiers stationed in Tiers 1A and 1B were required to provide “special treatment” to prisoners, such as

51 This mindset was established through a set of legal reinterpretations, memos, and executive orders that will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.
53 Though the Geneva Conventions expressly forbid stationing prisoners within a combat zone, Abu Ghraib was located right in the center of insurgent activity (Gourevitch and Morris).
removing sites of comfort like mattresses and clothing, and they were responsible for administering "physical treatment" that involved forcing prisoners to perform difficult or degrading activities for extended periods of time. The guards were also responsible for imposing regimes of sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation, starvation, and submersion, and for forcing prisoners into stress positions and exposing them to the elements (Gourevitch and Morris). They were required to perform these duties with minimal, if any, instruction as to what constituted inappropriate behavior; their superiors issued oblique orders, warning only against killing the charges (Gourevitch and Morris).

This apparatus of interrogation and "softening up" grew out of a special access program (SAP) created earlier in the War on Terror. In November 2001, after military officials voiced concerns to the administration that onerous legal and bureaucratic procedure had thwarted their attempts to capture senior Al Qaeda and Taliban members, the Department of Defense created a highly secret "black" program, of which less than 200 operatives and officials had knowledge, which enabled operatives to circumvent standard procedure. Its origin was the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) program created during the Cold War to teach soldiers how to resist torture by the enemy, and its mantra was "Grab whom you must. Do what you want." SERE was never intended to be applied to American prisoners, not least because it taught soldiers how to provide false confessions if they were tortured (Shane and Mazzetti). The program, like its SERE predecessor, was as concerned with psychological as with physical pain, employing sexual humiliation and isolation in order to destroy the order of a prisoner's reality and thereby foster dependence on captors.

The scope of the SAP, the individuals to whom it was applied, and the operatives for whom it was authorized, were gradually expanded through the early stages of the War on Terror; the program was then extended to Abu Ghraib by Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and Stephen Cambone, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence after the United States' invasion of Iraq. Though the SAP apparatus was not initially deemed productive at Abu Ghraib, it was quickly systematized by Major General Geoffrey Miller, former commander of Guantanamo Bay prison. Miller, who had been dispatched to "Gitmoize" the prison system in Iraq so that it would generate more "actionable intelligence," introduced and normalized the SAP at Abu Ghraib: he "briefed military commanders in Iraq on the interrogation methods used in Cuba—methods that could, with special approval, include sleep deprivation, exposure to extremes of cold and heat, and placing prisoners in 'stress positions' for agonizing lengths of time" (Hersh). The army's military intelligence (MI) was consequently assimilated into the SAP.

55 Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick stated that he was ordered to "stress out" a prisoner under these terms by his superior, Criminal Investigative Division Officer "Agent Romero." Specialist Sahrina Harman similarly told The Washington Post that it was her job to break down prisoners. See Jackie Spitzer, "Soldier: Unit's Role Was to Break Down Prisoners," The Washington Post, May 8, 2004, Page A01.
58 Jane Mayer, interviewed by Terry Gross, National Public Radio, Fresh Air from WHYY, September 18, 2008. A possible early motivation for photographing the sexual humiliation of prisoners was reported by Seymour Hersh: "It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends" ("Annals of National Security: The Gray Zone").
59 Hersh reports officials thinking "Human intelligence is poor or lacking . . . due to the dearth of competence and expertise . . . The intelligence effort is not coordinated since either too many groups are involved in gathering intelligence or the final product does not get to the troops in the field in a timely manner" ("Annals of National Security: The Gray Zone").
after Miller’s arrival; the MP guards who worked under the MI subsequently provided the

legwork for it.60

Public disclosure of the existence of the SAP at Abu Ghraib, in the form of the
circulation of the photographs and their ensuing scandal, posed a political problem for military
and defense officials: the photographs obviously could not be covered up, but many believed the
SAP needed to be protected and maintained. Explaining the events depicted in the photographs
to the public would mean destroying the program’s cover (Hersh, “Annals of National Security:
The Gray Zone”). The administration therefore employed the MPs depicted in the photographs
as scapegoats for the affair, thereby protecting both the SAP and the administration’s public
image in the midst of its reelection campaign.

In objectifying moments of illegality and abuse that involved particular soldiers, the
photographs localized the War’s apparatus of torture to individuals who could be condemned,
and therefore averted attention away from torture’s employment at large. They also localized
U.S. policies of torture in the techniques depicted in the photographs—techniques Mark Bowden
has termed “torture lite,” because they “generally leave no permanent marks and do no lasting
physical harm.”61 Not dangerous when they occur in moderation, such techniques are only illicit
when taken to extremes. For this reason, the type of sexual harassment and degradation depicted
in the photographs can seem relatively harmless when not considered in excess. Localization of
torture to the images anc the techniques they present thus in many ways facilitates trivialization
of the act and renders it more palatable to the public: it is far easier to acknowledge that soldiers

60 Hersh reports officials thinking “It’s working. We’re getting a picture of the insurgency in Iraq
and the intelligence is flowing into the white house. We’re getting good stuff. But we’ve got
more targets (think prisoners) than people who can handle them” (“Annals of National Security:
The Gray Zone”).
61 Mark Bowden, “The Dark Art of Interrogation,” The Atlantic, October 2003,

rely on stress positions or sexual humiliation than that they use techniques involving physical
mutilation, though the situations equally violate U.S. international legal obligations. Moreover,
the seriousness of the events depicted in the photographs was undermined by the fear in which
many U.S. citizens still lived when the images were released; the photographs seemed to play to
this fear by reassuring viewers not be fearful of the “terrorist threat,” because the United States
was protected by strong civic defenders.

II. Complicating the Story: Specialist Sabrina Harman

While photographs of inappropriate and cruel behavior were taken by many soldiers at
Abu Ghraib, many of the most famous images—including the notorious picture of the “hooded
man” (see figure 1)—came from the camera of Specialist Sabrina Harman of the 372nd Military
Police Company. Harman is depicted in several photographs, smiling atop of a heap of naked
prisoners or grinning above a macabre corpse with thumb-up (see figures 2 and 3). She is one of
several soldiers convicted of felony charges in the legal case arising from the scandal.62

Investigation into Harman’s case, and publication of several of the letters she wrote to
loved ones while stationed at Abu Ghraib, have revealed that even her seemingly straightforward
photographs of torture and abusive treatment have stories that exude the moments of the
camera’s flash.63 For while it is easy to reduce many of the Abu Ghraib photographs to nothing
more than cruel “trophy” pictures, the events that transpired before and after the snapshots were
taken are much more complex. Considering the photographs without their narrative contexts

62 Harman was charged with destruction of government property, maltreatment of a deceased
body, and tampering with evidence, as a result of her interactions with the corpse of Manadel al-
Jamadi.
63 “Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment” is outlawed by the 1984 United Nations
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
ignores the complicated power structures underwriting the scenes, while the images
ostentatiously exhibit the power disparity between guards and prisoners, they do not allude to the
larger torture and political apparatuses at work in the background.

The story behind the photograph of Harman posing above a corpse (figure 3)
demonstrates the misperceptions, and even injustices, that are risked by consideration of the
photographs in isolation, rather than as a form of photographic essay. The body in the picture is
that of Manadel al-Jamadi—an Iraqi insurgent suspected of connection to the deaths of two Iraqi
members of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The photograph was taken by
Corporal Chuck Graner, after Harman and Graner entered a shower room their commander had
informed them was storing the body of a man who died of a heart attack. Harman has claimed
that the original motivations prompting this photograph was nothing more than curiosity and
desire to document the novelty of standing beside a dead person (Morris, “The Most Curious
Thing”).

The picture of Harman posing with Jamadi, however, is not the only photograph of
Jamadi’s body, nor does it encapsulate Harman’s experience of the episode. Little over an hour
later, suspecting that she and her peers had been lied to by superiors, Harman returned to the
body. Having realized it was impossible that the mangled body packed in ice had died from a
heart attack, she photographed the grisly forensic details: “every little bruise and cut...to prove
to pretty much anybody who looked at this guy, ‘Hey, I was just lied to. This guy did not die of a
heart attack. Look at all these other existing injuries that they tried to cover up” (Gourevitch and

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64 Errol Morris, comment on “The Most Curious Thing,” Zoom Blog, The New York Times,
comment posted on May 15, 2008, http://morris.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/the-most-
curious-thing (accessed November 1, 2008).

These later photographs, less sensational than the one in which Harman appears, received
far less publicity—and for good reason, as they provided forensic evidence pertaining to
Jamadi’s murder. Unbeknownst to Harman and Graner, Manadel al-Jamadi had been killed
sixteen hours earlier, during an interrogation with a CIA officer; Harman and Graner were thus
unwittingly embroiled in the extensive cover-up operation sparked by the homicide, which
initially implicated various intelligence organizations, including the U.S. Navy Seals, the CIA,
and Military Intelligence (Morris, “The Most Curious Thing”). This covert back story, however,
is far from present in the photograph of Harman smiling above Jamadi’s body. Indeed, focus
solely on this initial image—by the media, the administration, and many viewers—facilitates not
only ignorance of the horrifying nature of Jamadi’s death, but also misperception of Harman as
his self-satisfied murderer.

Unlike the memento photograph she took with Graner, the intention of Harman’s latter
forensic photographs was ostensibly documentation. Harman, who wanted to pursue a career in
forensic photography, has in fact cited documentation as her primary motivation for taking
pictures at Abu Ghraib in the first place. Of course, it is difficult to accept this statement at
face value. Harman was, after all, imprisoned and court martialed for the activities she
photographed at Abu Ghraib, and her images have been widely censured. Nonetheless, the
letters Harman wrote to loved ones while she was stationed at the prison suggest that she was
quite ambivalent about the events depicted in her photographs and confused about her urge to
take them. Her letters express a desire to record the abusive treatment she witnessed daily, even
while that desire was often overwhelmed by a need to conform to the culture of the prison and
perform her duty. Although representations inevitably fall short in conveying the experience of

65 Sabrina Harman, interviewed by Errol Morris, “Look I Have Proof,” The New Yorker, March
those who suffer, photographs that depict human misery are generally treated by the liberal humanist tradition as positive contributions to our knowledge of injustice and ability to feel solidarity with those in pain.66 In this vein, Harman’s letters suggest she believed her photographs might serve as positive social contributions if she published them, though she never established a plan for doing so.

Harman’s urge to document as witness, however, can hardly be understood as her sole motivation. Several letters suggest that frequently Harman would be drawn toward participation in or spectatorship of the events depicted by her photographs—at least initially. She was liable to embrace the sense of humor pervading practices like parading of prisoners in each other’s underwear or watching female guards molest their male prisoners’ genitals; afterwards, however, she would often realize with horror the full implications of such behavior.67 Perhaps most appalling of all, Harman regarded this uncertain division as something that isolated her from her colleagues, who did not seem to be plagued by conscience. Her letters reveal that the normative context at Abu Ghraib associated the abuse and torture of prisoners with patriotism and duty.68

III. The Images as Icons

Errol Morris has identified four photographs as the most iconic images resulting from the Abu Ghraib scandal: that of the “hooded man,” that of 372nd MP Lyndie England standing beside a prisoner on a leash, that of a pyramid of naked prisoners, and that of England pointing at the genitals of a naked man (see figures 1, 4-6).69 Undoubtedly, the most indelible and ubiquitous of these photographs is the “hooded man,” which depicts Ali Shalal Qaisi—the prisoner known to the 372nd MPs as “Gilligan”—standing on a C-ration box with his arms outstretched, his palms open.70 The picture offers a frontal view that makes Qaisi’s image seem to address the viewer directly. Electrical wires are tied to his fingers; they sag down and are caught underneath a draping black poncho.

The sole, dark figure against a garish background, Qaisi’s face is covered with a pointed hood that calls to mind the executioner and his victim, the humiliation of the pointed dunce cap, the headpiece of the Ku Klux Klan (Eisenman 54). Preventing him from seeing, the hood not only disempowers Qaisi by removing his capacity for foresight, but also robs him of his identity. Shrouded in black, so that only the outline of his body and dangling appendages are visible, Qaisi’s humanity becomes obscure.71 Though we now know that Qaisi was not actually in physical danger at the time, for the wires to which he was attached were not live, he believed himself to be threatened with electrocution. The photograph captures him in a moment of terror,

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66 I am thinking for instance of Walter Evans’s photographs of suffering during the Depression; the images taken of the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Charles Moore’s “Birmingham,” which documents violence at a civil rights rally; and Mathew Brady’s Civil War photograph of the “Federal Dead on the Field of Battle.”

67 After watching a sandbag be “put over [the prisoners’] heads while it was soaked in hot sauce,” she wrote, “Okay, that’s bad but these guys have info, we are trying to get them to talk, that’s all, we don’t do this to all prisoners, just the few we have which is about 30-40 not many.” Then, later changed her mind: “I don’t like that anymore. At first it was funny but these people are going too far...” (Goureевич and Morris).

68 “I guess I wasn’t a very good patriot,” she replied, when asked why it seemed that her peers could perform their duties with more enthusiasm and less hesitation than she did. “I shouldn’t have been there. I mean obviously I didn’t do what I was supposed to” (Goureевич and Morris).


70 For a lengthy period of time, the identity of the “hooded man” was unknown to be Qaisi. I think it is also worth noting that though Qaisi was abused at Abu Ghraib, he not only lacked any “useful” information, but also was also innocent of the crime for which he was originally charged.

fearing that the stress position in which he stood would cause his limbs to fail and his death to
swiftly follow.

A consideration of Roland Barthes's “studium” and “punctum” may be helpful for a
closer reading of the icon and what renders it so arresting. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes
differentiates between the studium of a photograph, or its ostensible subject and presumed
interest for a viewer, and its punctum—the element that pricks the viewer’s subjectivity and
causes him or her to cling to the picture psychologically (Fried 539). For Barthes, the detail that
pricks the viewer is unintentional but fundamentally intrinsic to the photograph, never staged by
the photographer; it seemingly transforms the photograph from a mere object into a palpable sign
of the subject it depicts.

What is so striking about the photograph of the “hooded man” is that it inadvertently
portrays Qassem as a connotative aesthetic figure, “liberated from contingency and circumstance
into a space of pure contemplation” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 294). Unlike most of the other
images from Abu Ghraib, the picture of the “hooded man” seems natural rather than staged: the
figure’s uncanny familiarity—evoking Jesus on the cross or a sovereign addressing his people—
seems too nuanced to be intended by Harman, its photographer. A Christological reading,
almost unavoidable given Qassem’s stance, renders the image particularly salient: Christ too was a
victim of torture and public humiliation; His martyrdom too was deemed necessary for the
salvation (read security) of others. The image’s incongruous casting of this abject prisoner as the
canonical image of Western sacrifice thus becomes a felicitous analogy that renders it inherently
poignant, not least because the analogy seems to be unconsciously revealed. Appearing to
capture a moment so naturally striking and imbued with such meaning, the image is one before
which viewers cannot help but pause.

This arresting quality is likely in large part why Qassem’s likeness has become so
ubiquitous as an icon in the discourse surrounding the War on Terror. The image’s ability to
catch viewers’ attentions and focus them on the messages both within and appended to its frame
grant it a degree of polemical “power.” As one of the only aesthetic and formally complex
pictures emerging from Abu Ghraib, and the certainly one of the only easily read along
Christological lines, the image is appropriated with facility as a symbol of the cruelty and
injustice of torture, U.S. security policies, and the war—that now eloquently adorns t-shirts,
pamphlets, murals, and posters.\(^\text{172}\)

**IV. On Photography**

The aestheticization at work in images like the photograph of the “hooded man”—a
product of the camera’s ability to isolate a moment from its context—may operate at counter-
purposes with documentation of hardship or suffering. When the camera objectifies a scene, it
essentially commodifies a moment that can later become a good belonging to the photographer;
in scenes containing violence and pain, suffering too is objectified, so that, as Nathan Gorelick
points out, the “subject’s pain is [potentially] reduced to a political bargaining chip, a source for
aesthetic elaboration, a sensational news item” (Gorelick, under “Literature Beyond Ethics”). In
the case of the photograph of Qassem, “the singularly *unrepresentable* experience of torture—the
reason for which it is inexcusable—is polluted by its representation” (Gorelick, under “Literature
Beyond Ethics”). In other words, the poignancy which viewers experience when they look at the
image is so divorced from the physiological terror Qassem actually suffered that the formal quality

\(^\text{172}\) In Iraq, the image is also referred to as “The Statue of Liberty”—an ironic remark on its
inconsistency with the liberal values embodied by the statue standing in New York Harbor. The
name also refers to a Baghdad mural that parodies the “hooded man” photograph with the image
of the statue of liberty wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood and preparing to electrocute the hooded
of the image essentially facilitates a distance between spectators and the photograph’s subject: we focus on the photograph’s aesthetic rather than the implications of its content. There is, as W.J.T. Mitchell has noted, “something deeply disturbing, even disagreeable, about this (unavoidable) aesthetizing response to what after all is a real person” (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 294). The aestheticization process encourages us to regard the photograph as an object and disregard that real individuals felt pain or may still be suffering.

This aesthetic quality in the “hooded man” photograph contrasts sharply with the amateurish, and almost crude, style of most other images taken at Abu Ghraib. Indeed, the collection of images emerging from the prison demonstrates that both intentions for and varieties of photographs can fall into myriad categories.73 Many of the guards’ decidedly non-aesthetic images, because of their giddy appearance, have been likened to such unsophisticated mediums as pornography,74 voyeuristic photography, and the class of snapshots disseminated on internet social networking sites; terrorists themselves use similarly amateurish and contrived photographs and video footage to spread messages and recruit members.75 Their coarse quality and ostentatious posing suggest a degree of visual artifice not present in the photograph of Qaissi.

73 Though they are not taken into consideration, it is important to note that the CIA interrogators operating in black sites around the world take documentation photographs as well—including photographs that depict the prisoner’s moment of capture that are intended to facilitate humiliation and degradation via the act of photographing. It would seem that such photographs are incontrovertible evidence of violations of the Geneva Conventions, and for this reason, it is unlikely they will ever reach the public eye.

74 The link between such images and pornography has been noted by Michael Ignatieff, who commented that the genres similarly effect viewers, “at first making audiences feel curious and aroused, despite themselves, then ashamed, possibly degraded and finally, perhaps, just indifferent.” Michael Ignatieff, “The Terrorist as Auteur,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/14/movies/14TERROR.html. When they were first released, the photographs were evaluated by many, including the Bush administration, similarly to pornography: as images to be hidden under the bed but tacitly tolerated—an uncomfortable shock.

Largely, such crudity and contrivance is a product of the images being intended as no more than memento photographs to document the U.S. soldiers’ stay in Iraq. Photography was an important social aspect of military culture at Abu Ghraib. Soldiers photographed themselves often: with locals during their free time as well as in moments that symbolized the eroticism of their locale and gruesomeness of their duty. Harman explained, “If a soldier sees somebody dead, normally they’ll take photos of it. I don’t know why, maybe it’s a curiosity thing or if they see something odd, they’ll take a photo of it. Just to say, ‘Hey, look where I’ve been, look what I’ve seen’” (Gourevitch and Morris, “Annals of War: Exposure”). For those far from home and living in awful conditions, photography was a form of souvenir making, a form of camaraderie, and a means for accumulating future bragging rights. The ritual was not a secret. In tiers 1A and 1B, Corporal Charles Graner, the officer charged with night duty, “made a point of showing his photographs to officers higher up the chain of command, and...nobody objected to what they saw” (Gourevitch and Morris, “Annals of War: Exposure”).

Individuals across America, particularly young adults, similarly document their lives through photography: they too establish camaraderie and status with peers by publishing pictures of everything from scandalous exploits to quotidian details. The ease with which images of the self can now be taken and shared via digital photography—a technological breakthrough that, compound with the internet and mobile devices, has fundamentally altered the sociology of the photograph—has positioned photography as a cornerstone of U.S. culture, and promotes a fixation on images of the self that can be constantly groomed or updated. Digital images and mediatization thereby exacerbate the flattering self-gratification inherent to photographs, and promote preoccupation with the appearance of oneself to online or television audiences that seem
ever-expanding. The United States’ fascination with reality television is just another example of our desire to be photographed in every aspect of our lives, to let the camera publicize anything.

The milieu of excessive photography at Abu Ghraib is thus merely a microcosm of a greater culture of panopticism that encourages cameras to intrude into every corner of our lives. Derrida has described this cultural phenomenon as “once again a question of the Enlightenment, that is, of access to Reason in a certain public space, though this time in conditions that technoscience and economic or telemedia globalization have thoroughly transformed” (Mitchell, “Picturing Derrida’s Autonarrativity.” 285). This desire to see all, know all, and show all—from the minutiae of our friend’s lives to clandestine prison cells across the globe—is premised on the belief that such information grants us the capacity to control our world, and the assumption that others are invariably interested in both what we have to say and the images that document our lives. 76

Harman indubitably used photography to document her life in Iraq within this context, but she presumably also photographed as a means of bearing witnessing to and participating in the events surrounding her. Even if she did not feel comfortable physically abusing or torturing prisoners (which may or may not have been the case), she could nonetheless join her peers and perform her duty of “softening up” as a spectator—indeed, as a spectator with a camera. By inserting a camera into the site of violence, Harman and other onlookers could essentially augment the humiliation and degradation of their prisoners’ experiences, and thereby become

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76 This assumption is evidenced in the prevalence of blogs and online social network sites that allow publication of digital pictures, and in new media like Twitter that prompt users to publicize their thoughts, feelings, and even locations, continuously throughout the day. These new mediums enable much of the individuals’ personal life to become accessible to a potentially extensive audience. Though they might seem to enable publication of mimetic representations of the self, in reality, they cultivate a preoccupation with how one appears to others—and essentially allow a presentation of a self that might be far from the actual.

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78 The very language of photography reinforces the power disparity, as the photographer is said to “take” or “capture” the subject.
The “taking” of human subjects by a photographer (or a writer) is a concrete social encounter, often between a damaged, victimized, and powerless individual and a relatively privileged observer, often acting as the “eye of power,” the agent of some social, political, or journalistic institution. The “use” of this person as instrumental subject matter in a code of photographic messages is exactly what links the political aim with the ethical, creating exchanges and resistances at the level of value that do not concern the photographer alone, but reflect back on [his] (relatively invisible) relation to the subject as well and on the exchanges between writer and photographer. (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 288)

In other words, the power disparity between photographer and subject is a product of invisible power structures that enable the photographer to be the individual with the camera, the one watching the victimization of another; the intervention of the camera essentially reifies these relationships by objectifying them in a photograph. For this reason, even well-intentioned photography of suffering can never be divorced from the photographer’s relatively privileged position in the power structure, while photography intended to cause violence can easily embrace and aggrandize it.

Torture, like the violence of terror, largely operates as a spectacle—or a performative and self-conscious set of actions that are meant to be noticed. Consequently, it has great capacity for intensification and consummation through photography. Spectacle is indeed at the heart of the Abu Ghraib images: in the posing, the smiling, the performing for the camera. The spectacles that the guards created for the cameras served as means for intimidation that subordinated prisoners as it exaggerated the guards’ power; the element of spectacle enabled the guards to downplay their own cruelty by fashioning their actions as *performances*, though it did so through enhancing the suffering of the prisoners. The guards were thus self-consciously attentive to their own actions in the manner inherent to performance, while the act of performing simultaneously distanced them from the prisoners and allowed them to trivialize their behavior as merely show.

**V. On the Smiles**

The intentions of the Abu Ghraib photographers are certainly not unambiguous—as Harman’s ambivalent relationship to her photographs demonstrates. Nonetheless, the photographs coupled with their backstory, together a form of photo essay, present the abuses and torture at Abu Ghraib as acts with which guards had an amenable relationship. The thumbs-up signs, grins, and jaunty poses—which guards displayed self-consciously and voluntarily—juxtaposed with the dejected faces and prostrate bodies of the prisoners, seem a blatant affront to viewers’ senses of compassion and notions of human nature.

Harman has insisted that, despite its propriety, the thumbs-up sign she sports in photographs like the one with Jamadi’s corpse is her trademark for the camera; and indeed, there are nearly two dozen other photographs taken before Jamadi’s death, in which she is similarly posed (Gourevitch and Morris, “Annals of War: Exposure”). While her pose may be partially attributable in this way to a military culture of performing for pictures that capture exotic experiences, to dismiss a series of images of similarly smiling guards as merely the result of a sociable penchant for posing and playing seems too blase. For the guards to act in such a way on several occasions with the knowledge of superiors and onlookers, and for them to intend to send their photographs to friends and family or keep them as visual mementoes, suggests that the pictures are manifestation of a far more dangerous internalization of the “otherness” of their Iraqi wards.
Indeed, the smiles in the photographs are unsettling, because they seem to suggest both an espousal of the violence being depicted and a trivialization of it. As a universally understood social convention, a sign of enjoyment that is often contagious, the smile seems shocking and brazenly aggressive in the context of the photographs: a product and fortification of the guards’ power and superiority that frames as humorously the incongruity between the power of the torturers and the subjection of their victims. Directed at the camera, the smile’s shamelessness suggests a sense of justification and pride; directed at the abject prisoners, it seems an absolute embrace of the pain—an act of violence in itself.

To some degree, the smiles are precisely what separate the torturers from their victims. They become a mockery—a social convention in which the prisoner cannot participate.\(^79\) The victims are different, because they cannot smile, even as their difference is what precedes the smile and engenders it. Smiles become evidence of the guards’ humanity, while the victims become “beings who do not smile—animals”: beings who cannot smile precisely because the guards believed them subhuman before the pictures were even taken (Henderson 192). Some fundamental differentiator between the guards and victims has been internalized before the advent of the camera, and becomes reified by the guards’ smiles. In this way, the smiles seem evidence of the process of pain falsification that Scarry contends is at the origin of the torturer’s behavior; they are both an expression of and determinant in this process of negation and trivialization that facilitate divestment of the prisoners’ common humanities.

Schuyler Henderson notes this attitude of “otherization” at the core of the photographs, present even in the images’ “potent details: the jaunty angle of a cigarette, sterile teal gloves, the recurring motif of the leash” (9). Henderson cites such details as evidence of the guards’


An ingrained association of the prisoners with animals: “[i]n one picture, the feebleness of a man is manifest in the drooping leash; in another, the power of the dog is kept in check by a taut leash” (9). Her reading of the photographs seems to be corroborated by the 372\(^{rd}\) MPs’ admissions that guards gave cartoon-like names to their wards and rarely knew the actual names of prisoners (Morris, “The Most Curious Thing”). Application of cartoonish names to their prisoners symbolically separated the guards from their charges, elevating the guards’ humanity while minimizing the suffering of their subhuman prisoners.

**IV. Social Memory and Violent Images**

Though the Abu Ghraib photographs are decidedly not artistic, they nonetheless call to mind a patrimony of violent imagery in Western art, and seem to demonstrate the depth to which the structures of oppressor-oppressed relationships within Western iconography have become entrenched in our cultural memory; regardless of how well-versed in aesthetics were the Abu Ghraib photographers or subjects, the formal features through which power disparities are legible in the photographs are likely informed, even if unconsciously, by the iconography of domination in the history of art. The “pathos formula” as discussed by Stephen Eisenman in *The Abu Ghraib Effect* is a useful point of reference when considering the images and their relationship to Western art. Originally developed by Aby Warburg, the “pathos formula” is an artistic motif in which victims are depicted as passionate sufferers who willingly embrace their own subjection. Throughout history the motif has accrued a “collective memory of images” of anguish and morbidity that have been assimilated into our social consciousness (Eisenman 54).

In *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, Eisenman considers the “pathos formula” to include all depictions of victims that present “the internalization of castration, self-alienation, and even
the eroticization of suffering” (54). In this context, victims are not archetypes, but instead embody “recurring structure[s] of thought” that have been used to rationalize torture and abusive treatment since the age of Rome (54). Eisenman suggests that long before the Enlightenment’s cultivation and systematization of rationality, this motif exemplified, reinforced, and justified through art, epistemologies of imperialism reliant upon exploitation and torture. Artworks can thus be understood as transcriptions of ideologies, depicting victims who have internalized the same racist thought structures as their oppressors (54). Eisenman contends that the Abu Ghraib photographs “are not exceptional images in the history of Western visual culture, they are rule” (44). Consequently, a large part of why the United States public did not actively respond to the images is because their iconography was uncannily familiar, and primed structures of thought that facilitated rationalization and justification of the prisoners’ suffering.

Eisenman identifies three modes in which the pathos formula’s theme of willing subservience appears: the form of deserving abjection, in which the victim appears to deserve his punishment; the form of suffering as a sacrificial or purifying act, in which the victim subordinates himself to his pain and welcomes it; and a form that attempts to rouse sympathy for victims and vilify oppressors, by depicting some variation of the master-slave dialectic. In unintentionally engaging the first mode of the pathos formula, deserving abjection, which presents “the body as something willingly alienated by the victim (even to the point of death) for the sake of the pleasure and aggrandizement of the oppressor,” the Abu Ghraib photographs too participate in this tradition of Western iconography (16).

Such images of abjection are as old as Trajan’s column, and, in fact, are scattered across the city of Rome—from the Forum’s ruins to the walls of the Papal chambers in the Vatican, and countless sites in between. These artworks depict oppressors as deserving of their power and the oppressed as somehow deserving of their suffering. Eisenman illustrates this dynamic with the defeated warriors of Hellenistic sculpture and Michelangelo’s bound slaves, and in such frescoes as Raphael’s “Battle of Ostia” and Vasari’s “The Battle of Lepanto,” which recount on the walls of the Papal chambers the Christian assault on Islam during the crusades. The Abu Ghraib photograph depicting a pyramid of abject men (figure 5), composed as a “dog pile” of nude and prostrate bodies with downcast faces, portrays individuals similarly positioned below a powerful standing figure; several other photographs exhibit the bodies of guards and prisoners in similar dispositions. This is how subjection is supposed to look.

Images of suffering as purification, Eisenman’s second category, abound in Renaissance and Mannerist art. Much of the artwork in this category is religiously minded and centers on the deaths of Christ and the saints, aestheticizing the anguish, pustion, and flagellation of these figures in order to encourage emulation—and by extension, to promote the purification of viewers’ souls. Artists intended the beautiful poignancy they granted their suffering figures to make an argument about the devoutness of the figures’ characters that might inspire devotion in viewers. While Christ is the perennial figure of aesthetic suffering in Western art, St. Sebastian too is identifiable as such an icon, with his ever-obeissant heavenward gaze and beautiful body plastered with arrows. A series of pious St. Sebastians, in attitudes of willing submission to their martyrdom, can be traced from Pollaiolo through Perugino, Sodoma, and Titian.80 The impression inherent to these images that suffering can sanctify is a recurrent claim of Western culture—one that is tacitly present in the iconography of the “hooded man,” as well as in notions

80 Michelangelo, however, is the paragon of depicting passionate suffering. The pulsating and muscular bodies he created as he strove toward ideals of beauty and sacrifice are at once completely in pain and completely beautiful, and epitomize the rendition of poignant pain.
that torture can strengthen or masculinize its victims (which will be discussed in the next chapter).

The final mode of Eisenman's pathos formula arose during the mid- to late-18th century, with images of suffering that attempted to provoke sympathy for particular causes and tacitly affirm Kant's "categorical imperative" (14). Eisenman offers William Hogarth's cartoons criticizing the cruelty and hypocrisy of middle-class London, as well as cartoons employed by the Abolitionist movement, as a starting point for this category of art; later came the work of Francisco de Goya, whose 19th century "The Third of May, 1808," "Saturn Devouring His Son," and Disasters of War series, directly challenge the salvatory aspect of suffering by presenting a clearly negative attitude toward human brutality (86). Inclination toward such politically minded art increased in the twentieth century with the rise of fascism, as artistic movements attempted to respond to world events by rendering their work social statements.

Many artistic depictions of torture, such as those by Goya, Leon Golub in the 1980s, and Fernando Botero most recently, fall into this category. They attempt to present torture so that viewers will perceive it as a horrifying act, and consequently, there is often a degree of shock and sensationalism in their works appropriate to such aims. Though these artists attempt to be raw, their works, like those in category two, must to some degree aestheticize the suffering of victims in order to convey their argument—and in so doing, they risk distancing viewers from the immediacy and ugliness of suffering and objectifying the pain their work aims to protest and prevent.

VI. On Images and Accountability

Methodologically, the Abu Ghraib images are a demanding subject: informed by countless political, social, and artistic factors—and yet fully elucidated by none. While this chapter has thus far delved into the political background of the photographs, considerations of medium and meaning, and possible reasons for their inability to stimulate public outcry, it has not yet positioned U.S. viewers vis-à-vis responsibility. Thus, it now seems prudent for me to acknowledge that we can never work out all of the issues within and surrounding the unsettling photographs, and use this final section to inquire into how we can responsibly approach and respond to images of violence or atrocity.

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag proposes that the deluge of atrocity images claiming our attention and emotion is so dense that it would be impossible to respond adequately to all of them. Richard Rorty concurs, writing that U.S. culture is plagued not by "stimulus overload, but demand overload," which "fits into a more universal cognitive combination...the oppressive difficulty of knowing that there is too much to do, too many demands even to discriminate between."

Sontag suggests that in order to cope with the excess of images in our culture, we inevitably must privilege some images over others; typically, we choose those that affect us most urgently or those in which we have the most immediate stake. Proximity matters. Therefore, images that depict individuals undergoing violence or pain halfway around the world are less likely to capture our attention than those same images would if they showed the children down the street or our close friends.

Distance between viewers and the individuals depicted suffering may be purely geographical in this way, or, more significantly, it may be psychological: based upon a deep feeling that the individuals within photographs are irreducibly different from us. The photographic medium itself, which employs the camera to mediate between us and the actual,

only compounds this sense of distance. No matter its origin, the inability to feel the urgency or immediacy of the victims’ pain tends to govern our reception of the Abu Ghraib photographs; while they may temporarily shock or inform us, make us feel anger or pity, in the end, the images can easily be reduced to mere objects, and quickly dismissed.

Sontag contends that exacerbating this already problematic distance is the impotency working at a meta-level in atrocity images like those from Abu Ghraib. She claims that despite their disgust with the photographs, viewers fundamentally believe they can do nothing to change the systemic issues reflected in them; thus, what inures us to culture’s overload of images—particularly violent ones—and inhibits an efficacious reaction, is not merely the sheer number of images but also the continuous frustration of knowing that we are unable to effect change on all, perhaps any, of the atrocities they depict. Her argument seems compatible with the experience of life under a state of exception; it seems plausible that many indeed understood their relationship to the political structure governing the United States after 9/11 to be characterized by powerlessness.

On the other hand, perhaps in offering blamable and guilty faces, the photographs actually mask viewers’ own relationships to the power structure that enabled U.S. guards to be at Abu Ghraib, taking pictures in the first place—thereby masking our relationships to complicity and responsibility. Perhaps viewers are not stimulated to take action, because they do not see how the images personally correspond to their situations as U.S. citizens benefiting from the events depicted. Photography is not perfectly mimetic; it cannot demonstrate exactly what is there, because it cannot capture such intangibles as invisible power structures, and because it introduces the interventions of human creators advancing objectives and human viewers interpreting them. As Anna Sicomopolous observes, images "embody and mediate hegemonic power because of who made [them], what messages they convey, as well as when, where, and how they are circulated in society."\(^3\) To attend to the myriad of messages and associations governing images like those that emerged from Abu Ghraib, and to discover the historical and political contexts in which they are situated, Mitchell proposes that viewers utilize "the tuning fork of critical reflection, based on a Nietzschean sounding of idols of the mind, that entails accepting the presence of the images and their polemics, realizing that images encourage us toward oversimplifying and thinking irrationally, and paying closer attention to their multiple layers and echoes throughout history."\(^4\) By bringing attention to their formal and subjective content, extra-textual narrative, and relationship to a history of iconography, prevents such photographs from sliding by us and adhering unnoticed to similar images already present in our culture.

Yet, while we critically “sound” the images streaming through society, it seems we should also be considering both our reliance on their information and the excessive panopticism they promote. Photography of the minutiae of our daily lives positions mediatization at the center of our experiences and promotes fixation on self-image; still worse, photography of violence like torture entangles the photographer in collusion with objectifying violence and misery. As Nathan Gorelick suggests, we must shift away from this dependence on images to inform and mediate our experience of the world, especially when violence is at stake, for "to focus exclusively on that which can be seen is to sensationalize suffering, to isolate it...and to privilege the panoptic characteristics of the systems of thought from which torture is viewed as a strategic and necessary means to an end" (Gorelick, under “Conclusion: The Excess of

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Responsibility"). If the system of liberal democracy forces contradictions like torture into the
dark recesses of its bulwark, those recesses should be brought to light, but attempts to contain or
delimit torture through such mimetic images risks "a different kind of satisfaction than that
which is demonstrated by a smiling prison guard at Abu Ghraib—a voyeuristic pleasure in
consuming images of a suffering other and a dangerous appropriation of that suffering as
something to be easily understood and made one's own" (Gorelick, under "Literature Beyond
Ethics). Instead of allowing images of torture to become the root of our perceptions of the act,
we should sound them for their layers of messages and evaluate those messages; we should
situate them within the power structures imperceptibly present in their frames; and we should
remember that they are silent—lacking the voices of victims. "The true challenge," as J.M.
Coetzee wrote, "is how not to play the game by the rules of the state...how to imagine torture
and death on one's own terms."85

Chapter Three, Torture and the Fantastic: Epic and the American Identity

I mentioned in my introduction that this thesis presumes the implicit presence of a
collective public body—the collective body of at the heart of liberal tenets like popular
sovereignty, which in times of fear and uncertainty might relinquish its rights in favor of
heightened security provided by the state. The catastrophe of the September 11th attacks was a
painful shock to that collective American body, a shock which soon became a memory
challenging previous conceptions of American invulnerability and invincibility, as well as the
strength of the nation's ideals. To understand why this collective body might be willing after
9/11 to tacitly consent to a state of exception or status quo of torture requires attention to the
collective psyche: the collective imagination's interpretation of the social identity crisis posed by
September 11th as it worked through the disaster.

One method for locating the workings of the collective imagination is the epic film, a
genre meant to appeal to wide and mainstream audiences by depicting clearly demarcated
archetypal heroes with capacity for unusual human feats.86 The epic in contemporary culture is
often considered synonymous with successful blockbuster film and is undeniably profit driven;
epic franchises are some of the most lucrative production ventures (Santas 13-15). Such profit-
consciousness, however, makes these productions especially attentive to satisfying their
audience's desires—delivering to the collective body that which they lack, assuaging fears or
fulfilling wishes through hero figures with agency over their uncertain film worlds. The beloved
heroes of these productions are invested with qualities that reflect or respond to
temporaneous collective conceptions of bravery, virtue, moral authority, autonomy, and
honor. From the identities of such heroes, and from the normative contexts in which they

85 J.M. Coetzee, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa,” The New York Times,

2008), 4, 12.
operate, we can make inferences about the fears, wishes, and desires of the collective body for
which they are created and to which they appeal. Broadcast around the world, epic films are
concurrently idealized projections, which in turn, become vehicles used by other nations to
understand and interpret American culture.

Unlike the classic epic film, with its huge casts, sets, and traditionally epic narrative (Ben
Hur for example, or The Ten Commandments), contemporary epics have become less self-
consciously structured by the traits outlined by classical conventions—and more prolific.⁵⁷
Epics now come in many forms, including historical drama, action thriller, and comic strip
adaptations (Santas 19). Nonetheless, these productions maintain the long narrative structures,
fantastic premises, and improbable coincidences inherent to the genre; epic films ask their
audiences for unquestioning acceptance of the spectacular, for a willing suspension of disbelief
in favor of the unusual feats performed by their super human heroes.

This chapter will consider three instances of the epic that have found significant success
in the post-9/11 cultural milieu: the network television program 24, the James Bond film Casino
Royale, and the Batman production The Dark Knight. (Though 24 is a television program and
not a film, it can be categorized as an epic production when the series is considered in its
entirety, because it constructs an archetypal epic hero, employs spectacle and remarkable human
exploits, and clearly responds to the post-9/11 social crisis in a manner meant to answer
audiences’ fears, wishes, and desires.) Though released at different junctures, all three
productions noticeably respond to the September 11th attacks and to the American identity crisis
that followed the attacks’ assault on the nation’s sense of invulnerability and security. This
identity crisis, catalyzed by the fear and uncertainty generated by 9/11, has been sustained over

the past eight years by the additional catastrophes of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the financial
collapse of 2008-2009; for this reason, it largely seems to still be governing the attitudes of
United States citizens.⁸⁸

The identity anxieties plaguing the U.S. since 9/11 are not unique to the era. Mass
feels of impotency, dispensability, disillusionment, and lack of control over one’s existence,
have occurred at many other historical moments in which prevailing ideologies or institutions
similarly seemed threatened: when the institution of religion was shaken by the rise of science
and industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century (a dilemma in many ways synonymous
with modernism); after the utter horror and meaninglessness of the First World War unsettled
faith in political states and ideals of patriotism; during the Great Depression, when capitalism
seemed to have failed; after the shocking capacity for human cruelty was revealed after the
Second World War, and individuals became disillusioned with liberal humanist notions of
human nature; and during the 1950s, when the threat of Communism and post-war social
changes facilitated mass conformity and forfeit of personal autonomy.⁹⁰ It seems that social
crises often can be understood as moments challenging preconceived identities and threatening
traditional categories for differentiating between or unifying political subjects. In particular,
several parallels can be drawn between the anxieties raised by the social crisis of the seemingly

⁵⁷ As outlined by Aristotle in his Poetics.

⁸⁸ It has been further complemented by such challenges to American self-perceptions of
benevolence, sophistication, and influence as the Abu Ghraib scandal, civil war in Iraq,
revelation of the nonexistence of weapons of mass destruction, and the general decrease in
international political goodwill.

⁹⁰ Various works discuss this phenomenon in different capacities. Apart from the artistic work of
individuals—modernist poets like Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, modernist novelists like
Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce, Primo Levi’s prolific writings on the Holocaust,
Ernest Hemingway’s novels of the Great War, to name a few—my considerations have been
shaped primarily by the work of Leon Suren’s’s The Modern Dilemma: Wallace Stevens, T.S.
Eliot, and Humanism, part III of Hannah Arendt’s Totalitarianism, and Leeming Medovoi’s
Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity.
interminable Cold War and that of the War on Terror. In both cases, masses of individuals responded to the challenge to their identities and ideologies by abandoning themselves to dominate patriotic behaviors that joined them with others, thereby renouncing personal autonomy in favor of a unity through nationalism that ostensibly offered security; the political milieu of both periods therefore similarly viewed dissent as a threat that might disturb general acquiescence with state action.

The epic productions under scrutiny in this chapter respond to the fears, anxieties, and desires permeating the post-9/11 cultural milieu by offering heroes who can successfully assuage and satisfy them. The heroes in these productions are all civic defenders who privilege duty over personal relationships; they embody robustly masculine identities that maintain a sense of agency over the chaos and evil of the world and are characters that reassuringly reaffirm the identities under assault by the September 11th attacks. Bond and Batman are composite action heroes who have historical popularity with male audiences. Consequently, they have been mainstreamed to the extent that they have amassed considerable global audiences. Along with Jack Bauer, the hero of 24, they operate outside of the rule of law: Batman is a vigilante, while counter-terrorist agent Bauer anarchically disregards U.S. law, and Bond operates above it—as a 00 special agent with a license to kill.

It is worth emphasizing that the fantasy of 24, Casino Royale, and The Dark Knight, does not necessarily lie in spectacular special effects or particularly whimsical fictions; rather, most of the formal qualities of these productions—their filming, editing, acting, and directing choices—tend toward realism and reject excessive reliance on computer generated imagery (Shin and Namkung 131). Instead, these productions are fantastic because the premises and assumptions of their narrative structures, which tend to be much less perceptible than ostentatious special effects or magic, are fantastic. In the productions, human beings have the capacity to behave in fantastic ways, science is imbued with fantastic powers, and the narrative world’s degree of order or disorder too is fantastic. Such unobtrusive elements of fantasy can be easily overlooked—a fact that is particularly pertinent to the three productions under scrutiny, whose elements of fantasy are further obscured by topical relevance.

Scenes of torture and interrogation are common to and serve as necessary devices within all of the epic productions under scrutiny. In these productions, the relationship between torture scenes and the narrative structure is closely entwined with the identity formation of heroes and the relationship between heroes and the law. For this reason, the scenes serve as loci for understanding the films’ commentary on the collective American body’s myths, identity, desires, and values. Especially considering their formal attention to realism, these scenes, like the images of torture discussed in the previous chapter, risk becoming a source of information about the act, because the collective audience has little first hand experience with the actual thing; aspects of the torture act in each of the scenes under consideration might easily be mistaken by audiences for the real experience. In such a way, the scenes risk and sometimes invite a blurring of reality and fiction that facilitates skewed perception of the actual, and—through such misperceptions—these scenes work to shape reality.\footnote{As Baudrillard has noticed, our life experience often seems to be a “hyperreality,” in which reality has “always already [been] reproduced”—or that which is deemed reality has never actually existed. Quoted in Douglas Kellner, \textit{Baudrillard: A Critical Reader} (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwood Ltd., 1994), 171.}

To highlight the importance of underlying assumptions, and the dangerous ease with which they can be overlooked, I will preface my discussion of these epic productions with an analysis of the ticking time bomb scenario—a pseudo-philosophic representation of torture premised on fantastic grounds, which nonetheless has been employed by utilitarianism and the
liberal humanist tradition as an exception to the absolute prohibition on torture, and by the state of exception as a vital necessity for security. Though a hypothetical situation, resting on fantastic premises, the scenario purports to possibility. In the contemporary torture debate, it has been treated as the singularly important scenario into which all discussion of torture can be collapsed; torture apologists have cited the scenario as reason why blanket condemnation of torture cannot stand, while those who argue in favor of absolute prohibition have also been forced to reconcile it with their views. Treated as reality in this manner, the scenario’s fantastic character and underlying assumptions have been fundamentally obscured to the degree that the construct can be readily used as justification for torture, regardless of whether or not those assumptions are satisfied. Able to blend into reality in this way, the scenario has been strikingly able to influence actual public attitudes and policy preferences.

Behind their realistic façades, 24 and Casino Royale similarly present scenes of torture that bear little if any relation to the real act. Unlike the actual act of torture, which destroys one’s ability to narrate a story by attempting to destroy one’s ability to remember, value, and create or speak one’s own words, the scenes of torture in these productions often assume the victim’s ability to retain a sense of agency throughout the act. Whereas torture, as Joseph Slaughter points out, “fashions a nonentity out of the tortured’s subjectivity,” and “destroys memory by numbing the mind with pain, denying the victim the possibility of reconstructing an integral self through thought,” scenes of torture in these two films collapse the act into a simplified moment of opposition between goodness and evil, a confrontation between penetration and impenetrability, throughout which both the torturer’s and victim’s integral characters retain their autonomy (Slaughter, “A Question of Narration” 426).

The scenes serve as important moments of character development. Both when Jack Bauer tortures and when James Bond becomes a victim, he identities of the characters as strong, masculine figures are reaffirmed and developed. Thus, even when the moment of torture takes a physical toll on the character, as it arguably does when Bond is tortured in Casino Royale, this “toll” serves to mature him and help him realize his autonomy—rather than to destroy it. Just as one cannot hear the voices of the victims in the Abu Ghraib images, neither can one locate these voices in the words of the victims in these productions. For whether the victim is the production’s hero or villain, his voice does not sound with destroyed subjectivity; instead it sounds with the words desired by the collective body of the American torturer: words revealing the victim’s evilness if he is the villain, words revealing his strength if he is the hero. In a highly problematic way, Hollywood culture therefore supplies these representations with its own set of ventriloquized voices—and broadcasts them around the world.

Only in The Dark Knight are the effects of torture on both torturer’s and victim’s characters taken into consideration. It is worth noting that though all of the films under scrutiny are fantastic, as this chapter proceeds from 24 to The Dark Knight, the degree of formal fantastic devices (like special effects or elaborate costumes and devices) increases, while the degree of fantasy in the premises of the narrative structures decreases; the degree of fantasy in the torture scenes also follow this trend, so that by The Dark Knight the premises of the scenes are relatively realistic considering the medium. Indeed, the scenes of torture in this last film position torture in the most complicated manner: as sometimes necessary, but at odds with law and political morality—an act that damages the psyche of the perpetrator.
I. The Fantasy of the Ticking Time Bomb

The "ticking time-bomb" scenario pivots on the image of a captured subject who knows the details and whereabouts of an active bomb that is scheduled to detonate in a public space and thereby to take the lives of innocent civilians. Opposite this terrorist subject is the political official who has sequestered him and ostensibly must torture him, in order to extract the invaluable information that will avert the catastrophe and save thousands of lives. Thus, in the scenario, torture serves as a necessary mechanism for saving the lives of innocent citizens—and, within the world of the scenario, it always succeeds. In this context, torture is understood to have positive implications for the interrogator, or torturer, who is presented as a hero with clear and ethical intentions.

As Alex Bellamy points out, the origins of the ticking time bomb can be located in the eighteenth century utilitarian writings of Jeremy Bentham, who first imagined a scenario in which the necessity of securing the greatest happiness for the greatest number of citizens would require and justify a politician to tread upon the inalienable rights of a few. Bentham asks, Suppose an occasion were to arise, in which a suspicion is entertained, as strong as that which would be received as a sufficient ground for arrest and commitment as for felony—a suspicion that at this very time a considerable number of individuals are actually suffering, by illegal violence inflicted in intensity to those which if inflicted by the hand of justice, would universally be spoken of under the name of torture. For the purpose of rescuing from torture these hundred innocents, should any scruple be made of applying equal or superior torture, to extract the requisite information from the mouth of one criminal, who having it in his power to make known the place where at this time the enormity was practicing or about to be practiced, should refuse to do so? (emphasis my own) 91

Bentham, who viewed the inalienable rights of the liberal humanist tradition to be "nonsense on stilts," did not see how the answer to this question could be "no" (Slaughter, Human Rights, Inc. 24). According his utilitarian principles, the end result of saving hundreds of innocent civilians is justifiable grounds for the maltreatment of one criminal, who has the necessary information to bring about, but refuses to cooperate in, their rescue. The positive value of that criminal's salvation from torture cannot outweigh the value inherent to the salvation of hundreds of innocents who will be rescued from injury.

There is obvious merit in this type of utilitarian ethics; when one is placed in a position necessitating the choice between two outcomes, particularly such difficult outcomes as determining which of two groups should live or die, be tortured or not, the practicability of utilitarianism allows a dispassionate means for determining which path to choose. It is likely that, if placed in this exact situation, many of us, like Bentham, would see only one viable option. The problem with Bentham's scenario, however, is two-fold. Firstly, it proposes no guidelines for such cost-benefit analysis or burden of proof. 92 Secondly, and most significantly, it is such a remote possibility few, if any, of us would ever be placed in an identical situation; the assumptions on which such scenarios rest are simply too implausible.

Bellamy proposes four general assumptions on which the ticking time bomb scenario depends in order to justify torture. Firstly, the interrogator must apprehend the correct individual, who has the desired knowledge. Secondly, this information must be sufficient to

91 Quoted in Alan Dershowitz, Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.
prevent the disaster. Thirdly, the use of torture must elicit the appropriate information within enough time to avert the catastrophe, and, fourthly, the information retrieved must be accurate (Bellamy 141-142). I would argue that the scenario further presupposes the interrogator knows of a pending threat before the application of torture, and that it the subject is captured within an exceptionally narrow time-frame: after the interrogator has learned of the threat, but before the bomb detonates.

It seems important to note, alongside Bellamy, that this scene "is designed to prejudge the moral outcome" (141). The scenario rests not only rest upon the sense of moral authority attributed to the interrogator's cause, but also upon the interrogator's belief that the conditions mentioned above justify the use of torture, and would in fact make inaction wrong (141-142). In other words, the scenario is designed with such specificity that it becomes one against which few could condemn torture; and thus, when the it becomes the key defense of torture apologists, the crux of the entire torture debate becomes a hypothetical situation resting on fantastic premises. When all torture is collapsed into this one hypothetical construct, in which options are limited and the cost-benefit analysis weighs heavily in favor of employing the act, then all torture is deemed justifiable, even when the essential assumptions are not supported; treatment of the essentially fantastic scenario as reality enables inattention to its underlying, fantastic assumptions, thereby rendering it a justification for torture regardless of whether those assumptions are valid. In this way, this highly implausible scenario becomes the warrant for justifying torture regardless of the existence of actual ticking bombs.

While it is true that not all cases of torture in the real world have been brought to light—indeed, most will always remain hidden in the dark chambers of the world's intelligence organizations—it is nonetheless ridiculous to rely upon an artificial scenario as the cornerstone of discussion of torture or to promulgate it as a warrant for loosening the legal prohibitions on the act. Considering the unrealistic nature of the assumptions on which the scenario rests, and the lack of recorded examples of its historical existence, it is illogical to form perceptions and attitudes toward torture, or to reconsider decades of domestic and international law, just because in one artificial scenario, we could or even possibly should torture. As Henry Shue has written, "there is a saying in jurisprudence that hard cases make bad law, and there might well be one in philosophy that artificial cases make bad ethics. If the example is made sufficiently extraordinary, the conclusion that the torture is permissible is secure."94

In the real world, knowledge and intelligence are far from perfect—just how far from perfect has been exemplified by the United States' experience in the War on Terror. Thus, in the real world, each of the scenario's many assumptions is clouded by uncertainty. Let us consider those assumptions more carefully. To begin with, the interrogator needs to know for certain that an attack is pending: he needs to know that the suspect carries information about that attack (not something all of the "enemy" can know by proxy), before torturing him or her. This certainly would assume an extraordinarily effective intelligence-gathering apparatus: so great, in fact, that it contained intelligence about everything except where the ticking bomb is located (or else we would not need to use torture to find out). The interrogator also needs reasonable justification for believing that his prisoner has enough information about the attack to rapidly avert it.

93 The contemporary torture debate has seen a strain of reasoning, headed by Alan Dershowitz, but upheld by others, which proposes the ticking time bomb scenario as grounds for reconsidering blanket condemnation of torture. Dershowitz supports a system in which officials would be able to pressure warrants before interrogation and thereby legitimize their use of torture and ostensibly bring the act transparency.

The issue of time is vitally important here. The structure of terrorist cells requires that they alter plans and locations after learning of the capture of their members, in order to avoid further compromise; the cells cannot operate effectively without the element of surprise produced by their secrecy. Thus, in the scenario, to avert a pending attack, the interrogator would need to elicit the appropriate information from his prisoner before the terrorist cell has time to alter its plans. In some cases, the capture of an individual with the type of sensitive information that the scenario demands may persuade the terrorist cell to postpone the plan.

Granted that in the scenario an attack is nonetheless still pending (though even this is an assumption, for how can we know?) and the terrorist cell has not altered its plans or location, in order for the ticking time bomb scenario to be realized, the torture act would subsequently need to actually work—in the two-fold sense of both “breaking” the individual quickly, and forcing the individual to provide the appropriate information. This type of quick and truthful cooperation, however, is much easier to imagine than it is to produce. As the ticking time bomb formula reduces the complexity, uncertainty, and disorderliness of the world of interrogation, the act of torture is streamlined into simplicity: in the real world, interrogation takes time, patience and nuance, and torture does not always meet with speedy cooperation or truthful information.95

Moving beyond the scenario’s many assumptions, there are also several problems with its practical implications. For example, the scenario does not attend to the fact that in praxis authorization of torture, even for very explicit and “necessary” exigent circumstances, often slips into sanction for torture just for expedience’s sake; justification for that which is deemed “necessary,” like saving innocents from a pending attack, eventually slides into justification for that which is deemed expedient or helpful. Torture is the ultimate shortcut. The War on Terror


has witnessed how the practice can easily slip from situations of “necessity” to those which help cut corners: the Special Access Program (SAP) that was developed to expedite interactions with high-value terrorists was gradually expanded in scope over the course of roughly a year from application to valuable suspects, who presumably might have “necessary” or at least very important information, to widespread application at Abu Ghraib, where it could be used on “cabdrivers, brothers-in-law, and people pulled off the streets”—any prisoner who could potentially know something, just by proxy (Hersh, “Annals of National Security: The Gray Zone”).

In a recent essay on the ticking time bomb scenario, Elaine Scarry has argued that the another often overlooked aspect of the scenario is that it allows one to imagine an interrogator willing to overcome both his aversion to torture and his commitment to the rule of law, for the sake of a higher purpose (the saving of innocent lives), but does not presume that the same individual would be willing to accept the legal culpability and punishment tied to his crime.96 In this way, the ostensibly innocent interrogator stands somewhere between altruist and criminal, and certainly cannot be understood as an Antigone-like unadulterated moral agent, taking on a moral burden for the good of many—as the construction of the scenario would suggest. For such an individual would surely accept the consequences of his actions, as part of the same duty that required him to torture and breach the law in the first place. Moreover, when such an interrogator believes that his or her behavior will meet with approbation before ever acting, the act of injuring a defenseless individual requires really no moral courage at all.

96 Elaine Scarry, “Five Errors in the Reasoning of Alan Dershowitz,” in Torture: A Collection, ed. Sanford Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 282. Note that in her certainty that the torturer would have to overcome an aversion to torture and a deep desire to uphold the rule of law in order to execute the act, Scarry is arguing distinctly along liberal humanist lines.
II. Jack Bauer: The American Hero

The ticking time bomb scenario was popularized in 1960 by Jean Larteguy’s Algerian War novel, *Les Centurions*. The novel—which was likely inspired by or seen as a re-imagination of the closest recorded case to an actual ticking time bomb scenario that occurred during the Battle of Algiers—features a protagonist named Boisfeurais who has been tortured at the hands of the Nazis and the Viet Cong, and, in turn, heroically averts several pending disasters by torturing his enemies (Rejali 152). In contrast, during the actual situation, French Police Prefect, Paul Teitgir was faced with the threat of a bomb hidden in a gasworks facility and the possibility that his prisoner might have important information, but he nonetheless refused to sanction torture—and no bomb ever exploded. Larteguy’s novel can thus in many ways be understood to fantasize the scenario by reversing what actually happened.

Darius Rejali suggests that Larteguy’s novel is predicated on an attitude prevalent during the Cold War, in which democratic, liberal humanist ideals are believed to weaken and emasculate men. In this context, Teitgir’s refusal to torture can be read as manifestation of his craven character, the consequence of his identity as a democratic citizen more inclined toward equal treatment and letting others make difficult decisions than toward resolute action and the exercise of physical or psychological strength. It is therefore unsurprising that in *Les Centurions*, the use of torture is associated with reclaiming masculinity, virility, and potency. To illustrate this point, Rejali notes that one of Boisfeurais’s victims is an attractive young woman, and in the scene of her torture, Larteguy conflates the act of violence with impulses of love and lust. During the scene, the victim affirms her love for and attraction to Boisfeurais; she even admits to partially enjoying the pain (152). Larteguy’s eroticized plot suggests that Boisfeurais’s own torture at the hands of others restored his masculinity and strengthened him so that he became “man” enough to torture others (151-152). Torture is salvatory in the sense that it reclaims or “saves” his heterosexual masculinity.

Anxiety about the emasculating nature of liberal humanist ideals and fear that democracy was engendering spineless (especially male) citizens was not exclusive to France: it also raged through Cold War America. Americans, accustomed to decisive victories, were having difficulty accepting the lack of a tangible success in the Korean War, and the conviction that American POWs during the war had proved feeble vis-à-vis their enemies was widespread (166). It is within such a cultural milieu that the SERE program, mentioned in the previous chapter, had been developed to toughen American soldiers. Such anxieties were only compounded by what Leerom Medovoi calls the “agency panic” that resulted from the 1950s’ culture of containment—the fear that an era of conformity, mass culture, and suburban life, was robbing American citizens of identity and personal agency, warping them into mere cogs in social and political mechanisms beyond their control. The social identity crises of the Cold War thus provoked desire for reaffirmation of personal autonomy and masculine strength; for this reason, the period generated such rebellious heroes as James Dean’s Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* and Marlon Brando’s Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One*.

Several parallels can be drawn between the spectral and seemingly interminable Cold War and the War on Terror: dichotomous geopolitics, fear-mongering, anxiety about the enemy within the social body, nuclear threat. Not least among such similarities is the sense of crisis in American identity. Just as the War in Korea and the communist threat challenged the United

97 Darius Rejali, “Torture Makes the Man,” *South Central Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 152. In the actual situation, Teitgir’s Communist terrorist prisoner, Fernand Yveton, had been caught planting a bomb in the gasworks, and authorities feared the existence of another bomb, which, if detonated, would injure thousands. Nonetheless, Teitgir decided against sanctioning the torture.

States’ conception of itself in the 20th century post-war, the 9/11 attacks and terrorist threat have challenged the American identity in the 21st. Indeed, the 2003 orange alert that sent many Americans rushing to store provisions and fortify their homes is a recognizable throwback to the era of “duck and cover.” The traumatic disaster unexpectedly shook the nation on September 11th unsettled the United States’ perception of itself as an invulnerable but benevolent superpower in control of both its own security and the world order.

Unease and apprehension about such challenges to the United States’ identity and status are nowhere more culturally resonant than in the reception of the network television program 24, starring Kiefer Sutherland, which premiered only two months after 9/11. The first seven seasons have presented Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer, a hard-boiled utilitarian who works for the fictional American Counterterrorism Unit (CTU) and refuses to be inhibited by anything—including domestic or international law—when it comes to his job of protecting American lives from terrorists. With his utter disregard for the Constitution and the United States’ legal obligations, Jack is both the ultimate patriot and the ultimate anarchist. The world in which he operates is fraught with fear, continuous emergency, and a constant terrorist threat.

The series structures each season as one 24-hour interval—hence the show’s title. Therefore, each season’s very complicated storyline is understood to be conveniently resolved in just one single day, of which each episode composes one hour. The program is driven by the urgency of time: the minutes and seconds remaining for the hour of each episode continuously dwindle, with an ominous ticking that returns after each commercial break. Demandng that everything happen fast so that intricate plots can be untangled and thwarted within “one day,” it has little time to consider consequences that might result from its heroic characters’ behavior; as a result, the program relentlessly simplifies everything. This high tension inherent to 24 is highly conducive to exploitation by “ticking time bomb” plots, because the entire narrative premise of the show is essentially a ticking bomb; the “ticking” is explicitly embraced as the show’s temporal logic. The audience can never forget that time is dwindling, and the urgency viewers understand to be constraining Bauer’s actions encourages them to condone his reliance on torture to get information more quickly.

Jack Bauer’s mantra is “Whatever it takes,” because the terrorists with whom he interacts “don’t care about [our] rules.” He has adapted accordingly. Similarly disregarding our rules, Bauer ignores the need for warrants, helps suspects break out of prison, kidnap, and threatens elected officials. Placing himself above the law in this way has also translated into many scenes of torture. According to the Parent Television Council, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that serves as primetime television’s foremost nongovernmental watchdog, the program presented sixty-seven scenes of torture during its first five seasons, making it the most frequent portrayer of torture on television during that period. The ticking time bomb formula appeared, on average, twelve times during each of those seasons. Since every season represents

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102 Martin Miller, “24” and “Lost” get symposium on torture,” Seattle Times, 1/14/07. The Council counted four depictions of torture on primetime television in 1999, 127 in 2002, and an unbelievable peak of 228 in 2003—the year the U.S. invaded Iraq (“Primetime Torture”).
one 24-hour interval, this means that "Bauer encounters someone who needs torturing 12 times per day."  

On only one occasion—when he intuits that his prisoner is "not going to tell us anything"—does Bauer seem to lose his penchant for torture. The momentary dispute of torture's indispensability is quickly rejected, however, when, after wresting control of the prisoner, Jack's coworker uncovers a terrifying plot that threatens Los Angeles (Mayer, "Letter from Hollywood: Whatever It Takes"). The message in this scene, and countless others, is crystal clear: torture always works and is always necessary. Wavering for even a moment is dangerous.

Torture in 24 is always creatively macabre. It is also always effective, in the two-fold manner of both "breaking" the victim and producing the desired information in a timely fashion. Those whom Bauer interrogates reveal their secrets episode after episode (while Bauer himself, even after 20 months of torture between seasons five and six, has, of course, never been "broken"). Characters who question torture's usefulness or necessity are depicted by the program as bumbling weaklings or bureaucratic doctrinaires, who measure up poorly against a Bauer who always saves the day; indeed, the show overtly pokes fun at such agencies as Amnesty International. Jack always seems to be plagued by such individuals, who represent organizations—be it his own CTU, other government agencies, or ACLU-style human rights activists groups—that want him to adhere more closely to the rule of law. Yet, with the clock ever-ticking, Bauer consistently proves their concerns to be irrelevant—mere annoyances that obstruct his task at hand. He is therefore constructed as the ultimate foil to a United States weakened by democracy, never allowing liberal ideals or bureaucratic details to inhibit his performance of duty or espousal of bravery.

Jack's illicit activities and reliance on torture are often supported, however, by the current season's "president" character. In one season, for example, the usually very honorable president instructs a Secret Service agent to torture his national-security advisor: a suspected traitor. Because the audience has known for some time that the suspect is guilty, viewers are sympathetic and become "complicit in hoping that the torture works"—which, of course, it does. Just moments before the subject capitulates, the president resignedly admits, "[e]veryone breaks eventually." As Eric Greene has noticed, these president characters are often "black and thus presumably liberal." Consequently, through the vehicle of the president, the program grants torture support from even unlikely apologists; even the decent and progressive seem to recognize the necessity of the act.

Bauer's conduct and his all-encompassing dedication to his duty have evident consequences for his own life, largely manifest in a lack of meaningful personal relationships. In order to devote himself so completely to protecting America at all costs, Bauer must sacrifice his personal life and his family: his wife is killed, he becomes estranged from his daughter, he must torture family members, and he is alienated from his love interest. Bauer is, in short, what Paul Lytle calls the ultimate "utilitarian martyr" (Patterson 35). Yet despite these negative consequences in Bauer's personal life, the United States itself never encounters consequences for Jack's abrogation of the rule of law (Greene 183). There is no consequence for disregarding the

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104 The only President in the series who does not sanction torture is season four's corrupt President Logan.
Geneva Conventions, for example, when Jack stages a fake execution; though he is initially rebuffed, after the event is revealed as a bluff, all criticisms are dropped. The ramifications of torture too are understated. After Jack’s CTU coworker Morris O’Brian is captured, tortured, and capitulates, Morris returns to work in the next episode—or, the next hour(116,177),(462,231). When Jack himself is tortured to near-death in season two, he is quickly revived and back in action.

The program has been recognized, quite aptly, for capturing the zeitgeist of post-9/11 America. With its constant threats and continuous emergencies, it is readily understood as the zeitgeist of the state of exception (Finn). (The degree to which the current season of the program expresses an emergent post-Bush zeitgeist will be discussed in the next chapter.) Yet Jack Bauer has also achieved a presence in political discourse beyond the fictional realm of the series: often cited by politicians as the ideal American patriot, his is touted as a justification for harsh interrogation techniques and emblematic of the benefit of razing the bureaucratic structures that slow the terrorist apprehension.107 Treated by these politicians as a real person, Bauer is expropriated from his continuously urgent fantasy world and cited as a model for the civic defenders working in our own. Just as the ticking time-bomb scene has been appropriated by the torture debate in a manner that downplays its fantastic assumptions, Bauer too is divorced from the premises governing his fantastic world and used as a political bargaining chip to support pre-security policies—informing actual public attitudes and perceptions in the process.

Bauer’s attitudes and behaviors have had noticeable influence on cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point. U.S. Army Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, the dean of West Point, Stuart Herrington, a veteran interrogator, and Gary Solis, who designed and taught the Law of War for Commanders course at the academy, among others, have openly discussed the adverse effect of 24 on students’ perceptions of torture. Solis, for instance, has avowed that the program increased the frequency with which “Jack Bauers,” or students who believe that torture is a necessary and effective tool, appeared in his classroom: “I tried to impress on them that [Jack’s] technique would open the wrong doors,” he said, “but it was like trying to stomp out an anthill” (Mayer, “Letter from Hollywood: Whatever It Takes”). In a similar vein, Tony Lahouranis, an Army investigator, has explained that military protocol in the War on Terror, which demands new and creative interrogation techniques to contend with an ostensibly “new” type of enemy, inadvertently encourages agents to draw upon popular culture as resources as they construct interrogation strategies (“Primestime Torture”). Representations of torture and interrogation in 24 thus literally serve as points of reference for cadets and interrogators, just as they do for the U.S. citizenry: these scenes present techniques for emulation in real situations with real lives and laws at stake.

Considering 24 as a zeitgeist, the ostensibly manly figure of Jack Bauer can also be understood as a figure that bolsters an American identity under fire after 9/11. While the Cold

107 Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, was quoted declaring that “the show reflects real life.” Supreme Court Justice, Antonin Scalia, has commented that “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles... He saved hundreds of thousands of lives... Are you going to convict Jack Bauer?” John Yoo, the former lawyer for the Justice Department credited with composing the memos, which created a legal guise for the Bush administration’s torture policies, asked in his book War by Other Means, “What if, as the Fox television program 24 recently portrayed, a high-level terrorist leader is caught who knows the location of a nuclear weapon?” (Lithwick). Congressman Tom Tancredo, at the Republican primary debate in 2007, said that he was “looking for Jack Bauer” when it came to questions of torture. Ken Rudin, “Republication Presidential Contenders Meet on Stage,” NPR.org, May 16, 2007, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10204580.


109 The Inspectors General of the Dept. of the Army also acknowledged circulation of reports that both officers and noncommissioned officers have used techniques they remembered from movies (“Primestime Torture”).
War had primed the American public for anxieties that emasculation was inherent to democratic ideals, the social crisis presented by 9/11 similarly suggested we had grown lax about maintaining our more “masculine” American myths and identities: the predatory strength inherent to the bald eagle, the rugged individualism and determination that conquered the West, and the bravery of those who dwell in the and of the free. Revelation that the nation could be so unexpectedly attacked threatened the notion that the U.S., while quite capable of penetrating other countries, was invulnerable to penetration itself.  

The overtly gendered imagery of penetration is significant in this context because it reflects anxieties over masculine American identities that clearly underwrite policy in the post-9/11 era of the security state. Indeed, the imagery of penetration explicitly informs the Bush doctrine’s tenet of preemptive strikes—penetration of the enemy before “he” has the opportunity to penetrate us—while the tenet of unilateral response seems reaffirmation of a mythically male-rugged American individualist.  

Though the neoconservative agenda governing the U.S. post-9/11 is a relic George H. W. Bush’s presidency, the immediacy of the peril posed by September 11th instantly brought new relevance to its policies. Neo-conservatism was thus quickly offered as a means for stabilizing the masculine identity crisis. The administration and the media

\[\text{footnote} 10\] Unlike many other nations in the world, including most of its peer countries, the U.S. has rarely experienced attacks on the home front; instead, our troops have typically left the safety of their own borders to fight and invade abroad.  

\[\text{footnote} 11\] Aaron Thomas Nelson, “Simulating Terror,” in Jack Bauer for President: Terrorism and Politics in 24, edited by Richard Miniter (Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2008), 78. It is worth noting that, even while 24 embraces some tenets of the neoconservative agenda, reading the program as mere verbatim of neoconservative policies would disregard the complicated plot twists at the end of each season. Time and again, a corrupt American or Westerner is revealed as the origin of the season’s problems: in season two, it is a western businessman; season three an MI-6 agent; in seasons four and five Americans; and, in season six, the President and Western business interests. Moreover, throughout the series, politicians are complicit in Jack’s crimes or guilty of their own. Nonetheless, the program does support key Bush administration policies, using plot lines to both question and then defend such controversial issues as the infliction of citizens’ civil liberties and Guantanamo style-prisons.

concomitantly affirmed the existence of such a crisis—and thus the necessity of embracing neo-conservatism as an antidote—by disseminating the notion that the September 11th attacks were manifestation of Al Qaeda’s hatred of American ideals and consumer capitalist lifestyle, and focusing attention on America hedonism as a source of national emasculation. Consumerism had dulled our perspicacity, made us lazy and inattentive, and sequestered us away from the grittiness of the real world in a bubble of prosperity and security. In a December 2001 interview with Bob Woodward, President Bush echoed such sentiments: “I do believe there is an image of America out there that we are so materialistic, that we’re almost hedonistic, that we don’t have values, and that when struck, we wouldn’t fight back” (Rejali 166).

In the context of such insecurity, the nation came to deeply desire, even to need, Jack Bauer—who embodies the myth of masculine American identity and disparages the privileging of justice or equality over security. Bauer’s ability to take action decisively in tight situations, to be unconstrained by fear, and to act with utmost acuity upon valid intelligence, answers the “agency panic” plaguing a nation feeling beleaguered by something against which it could not offer conventional riposte: an organism difficult to name, define, find, or face, that adumbrated our lack of control over the world with its ability to attack from within, when we thought ourselves safe; an organism that the collective body had never known to exist and seemed powerless to efface. Into this chaos, Jack Bauer shines agency and manliness, by encouraging viewers to trust in their civic protectors, to believe that America can vanquish its terrorist enemies. His use of violence, as Eric Greene observes, effectively imposes order amidst fear and confusion: “24’s unflinching depiction of torture and violence does not really glamorize violence, it sanctifies it. In 24’s version of our world, words may be hollow, allegiances may shift, your closest intimates may deceive and betray, but violence clarifies” (Greene 182). In
offering a revision or reversal of September 11 (for if Jack Bauer had been in charge, the
attacks would never have happened), Bauer is the perfect projection of a strong American
identity to be consumed at home and broadcast around the world. 112

The world presented by 24 thus became a projection of the America for which many, in
the wake of September 11, deeply wished. The television program served not as an escape, but
as a reminder of the threat of terrorism and a reassurance that the U.S. could answer it. It is
positioned awkwardly as a production that purports to realize through topical themes and
plausible events—allowing bombs sometimes to explode, people sometimes to die—even as it
situates such themes within a fantastically premised world. Yet, just as daily correspondence
between President Bush’s office and intelligence agencies created a political milieu rife with
imminent threats and calls for constant vigilance, maintaining security at the top of the
President’s agenda, 113 so 24 worked to keep the menace of terrorism ever-present in the minds of
Americans—highlighting its continued risk: a degree not necessarily reflective of or
proportional to reality. 114

III. The Name’s Bond: James Bond.

Bearing in mind the epic heroism of Jack Bauer, and his fantastically urgent world—in
which torture and disregard for the rule of law are necessary to maintain American supremacy—I
turn next to the exploits of one of western cultures’ most beloved heroes: James Bond. A larger
than life icon central to contemporary Western mythology and part of an extensive franchise,

112 Jeanne Cavelos, “Living With Terror,” in Jack Bauer for President: Terrorism and Politics in
114 Similarly, the administration played to fears and anxieties by highlighting the terrorist threat
in press conferences, public addresses, and the proclamation of color-coded alerts.

part of the fantasy inherent to each Bond film derives from the imagination of each new iteration
as the hero; while portrayals of the Bond figure are always complete in themselves, a subtext of
comparison with past depictions renders each incarnation a composite character who must be
embraced. The Bond films, particularly Casino Royale, are predicated on the assumption that
Bond is a man capable of super-human feats of strength, implausibly perfect timing, and
relentless energy. He is one for whom risks and near-death experiences are neither rattling nor
significant.

Since 9/11, Eon Productions has released three Bond films: Die Another Day, starring
Pierce Brosnan in 2002, and Casino Royale in 2006 and Quantum of Solace in 2008, both
starring Daniel Craig. Unlike the Brosnan era films, which straddle Fleming’s original Cold War
geopolitics and the post-Soviet world, both the Craig films offer a modern variation on the
traditional Cold War geopolitics of Bond’s world. 115 Casino Royale explicitly presents itself as a
self-conscious reconfiguration of the Bond character for a post-9/11 world: M (the head of
British foreign intelligence and Bond’s supervisor) makes a point of acknowledging the end of
the Cold War, 116 and Bond’s enemies are linked to Al Qaeda. 117 Though the audience never
learns the specific scheme for derailing humanity that motivates the terrorist network lurking in

115 For commentary on the anti-imperialistic geopolitics of the newest Bond film, Quantum of
Solace, see Juan Cole, comment on “A Quantum of Anti-Imperialism,” Informed Comment
116 M laments, for example, “In the old days, if an agent did something... embarrassing, he’d have
a good sense to defect. Christ, I miss the Cold War.”
117 After an extensive action sequence involving a bomb at Miami airport, M informs Bond that
the events had been intended to deflake airline stocks, in the same manner the stocks had
collapsed on September 12—thereby connecting the international terrorist organization and its
villainous financier to the events of 9/11. (It is worth noting that the United States’ two largest
stock markets were not actually open on 9/12.)
the background of the film, a terrorist menace is nonetheless continuously informing the plot as
the film’s ostensibly most dangerous villain.

_Casino Royale_, which met highly favorable box office revenues and garnered a wide
audience (reaching 78 countries within two month), upholds the classic Bond plot-formula as the
twenty-first film in the film series (Shin and Namkung 127). Somewhat paradoxically,
however, its story, based on Ian Fleming’s first novel, is unique to the franchise in that it depicts
the “early Bond.” The film provides insight on the events that have shaped MI-6 agent 007 into
the man we all know as James Bond, by outlining formative experiences in his early career—just
as he has received his “00” status, or license to kill. Although the events depicted in the film
unquestionably occur after the Cold War, the audience is engaged in the fantasy that the early
Bond exploits recounted by the film have preceded all the other adventures of the series.
Differentiating the early Bond from the iconic amalgam recognizable in several decades of films,
_Casino Royale_ thus works to redefine the familiar character. As it traces Bond’s development
from an arrogant but blunt government “tool,” easily duped by his associates, to the classy but
hardboiled icon who trusts no one, the film proposes Bond’s suavity and hardened temperament
as learned mechanisms of self-preservation.

Concomitantly, _Casino Royale_ sets itself apart as grittier than the films that precede it,
particularly those of the Brosnan era. While Brosnan’s Bond relies on special effects and
gadetry, this film is heavy on realistic combat scenes and free-running stunts; there are fewer
gigantic guns, more iron-fist punches. Bond himself is rawer than audiences have seen him, or
realized he could be. Craig is one of the only Bond incarnations to suggest a psychological and
emotional depth to the character, which only becomes more complex throughout the film. The
introduction of a new actor, Daniel Craig, for this endeavor heightens the film’s self-conscious
novelty, reinforcing its function as both a pivotal post-9/11 revitalization of the series and a
vehicle for repositioning Bond in a post-9/11 world order.

Though the James Bond created by Ian Fleming is a distinctly British agent, the film
versions of Bond have always exhibited an Americanized Bond, and _Casino Royale_ is no
exception. The franchise, governed by the profit-driven Hollywood film system, has always
been dependent on U.S. capital for production and distribution (Shin and Namkung 130). It is
thus unsurprising that the figure of Bond the films depict is perennially an “American
Englishman”—cast to attract American audiences and reduce his British mannerisms (130). As
Jeremy Black points out, Fleming’s Bond figure has been “translated into a kind of Anglo-
American hybrid for the film role, and it is the film rather than the literary Bond that is most
familiar to millions around the world.”

Throughout the film series, and particularly in _Casino Royale_, the values and agenda of
the British intelligence community are closely related to those of the United States. The films
are renowned for demonstrating Britain’s position in a post-war world order: no longer an
imperial power, but in special rapport with the U.S.—its successor to role of superpower. In

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118 The Bond formula that it upholds as originally delineated by Umberto Eco: M gives Bond a
mission (in this case, to investigate an international terrorist organization). The villain (in this
case Le Chiffre) then makes himself known to Bond (attempts to bomb an aircraft at Miami
airport) and Bond responds accordingly (thwarts the plan). Bond and the villain parry back and
forth, each making moves (demonstrated via the high-stakes poker game). The Bond girl (the
agent for the British Treasury, Vesper Lynd) then makes her move (refuses to provide Bond with
additional funds for the poker game). Eventually, the villain captures and tortures Bond, who
escapes, attends to the villain’s demise, and reunites with the Bond girl. Referenced in Philip

119 The British corporation Eon Productions, which has produced nearly the entire Bond series,
was founded by two Americans; production has relied heavily on funding by American investors,
and distribution has been lead by Hollywood’s United Artists.

120 Jeremy Black, “‘Oh, James’: 007 as International Man of History,” _The National Interest_
both Fleming’s novels and the Bond films, Britain’s dependence on the United States is symbolized by the American agents who consistently come to Bond’s aid. In *Casino Royale*, for example, the United States makes an overt appearance as the character of Felix Leiter, a trustworthy CIA agent who works undercover alongside Bond in a high-stakes poker game, and provides financial assistance and encouragement when Bond needs it. This coordination between Britain and the U.S. is a consequence of the fact that in Bond’s world, just like frequently in our own, the two nations struggle against the same enemies with the same objective in mind—namely, upholding the ideals of Western society. Studies of word relationships in *Casino Royale* suggest that, despite its spotlight on British intelligence, the film actually projects strong linkages between “America” and the concepts of “safe,” “world,” and “best,” and thereby encourages a positive valuation of U.S. world leadership (Shin and Namkung 140). Though British, Bond can thus readily be understood as one who risks his life to uphold the values inherent to the U.S. hegemony, while his broadcast around the world can be understood as a means of reinforcing American soft power; accordingly, he is easily appropriated and embraced by U.S. audiences.

It is worth noting that Bond’s “nemesis” is depicted rather differently in *Casino Royale* than is typical to the franchise: his enemy, Le Chiffre, is not a megalomaniac villain, but a math genius who, though self-serving and dangerous, never seems monolithically evil—rather, Le Chiffre is an unscrupulous capitalist, who finances international terrorists by using bombs to control the stock markets. When Bond foils Le Chiffre’s attempt early in the film to deflate airline stocks by planting a bomb on an aircraft, the financier’s scheme is ruined, and he loses the money entrusted to him by the terrorist network. Consequently, the audience recognizes throughout the film that Le Chiffre faces a dual threat: from Bond on one hand and from the terrorists whose money he has lost on the other. In contrast to Craig’s physically powerful Bond, Le Chiffre never physically assaults anyone, and appears pale and thin. Noticeably dependent on an inhaler during moments of anxiety, and motivated by fear of the terrorist network whose funds he has lost, Le Chiffre is an unambiguously weak and effeminate villain.

Bond’s torture at the hand of the effete Le Chiffre late in the film is therefore a pivotal moment: it becomes both an explicit affront to Bond’s manhood and an affirmation of his heterosexual masculinity. As a rhetorical device familiar in Bond films, Bond’s torture is expected by the audience; it is also deemed tacitly necessary in order to push Bond to the limits of his inner, rather than physical, strength—and thereby force him to prove his mettle and his masculinity. The scene, underwritten with sexual tension (which is ultimately resolved when Bond has the desire for his love interest, Vesper Lynd), features Bond stripped naked and tied to a chair as Le Chiffre attempts to force him into revealing the account number for the bank account into which Bond has transferred the villain’s lost money.

Le Chiffre opens the confrontation by noticing Bond’s well-sculpted physique, sardonically declaring, “Wow. You’ve taken good care of your body.” Moments later, he caresses Bond with a rope that has been prepared as a whip—a rope knotted to look uncannily like male genitalia. Warning Bond that “if you do not yield soon enough... there will be little left

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122 Indeed, his evilness seems to inhere to a fanatic capitalism, for he has no scruples about what is done with the money he earns for others, and asserts that he does not believe in God, only “in a reasonable rate of return.”
to identify you as a man," Le Chiffre begins beating his captive's genitals. After each onslaught, Bond not only refuses to divulge the password (i.e. be penetrated), but also spits out countering verbal assaults that attack Le Chiffre's masculinity—retaliatory attempts at verbal castration. Just as Bond's castration becomes imminent, Le Chiffre's plan is thwarted when a member of the terrorist organization unexpectedly enters the torture chamber and shoots the villain.

At this point in the film, the audience has not yet witnessed Bond possess a woman; though viewers have been cognizant of a ripening sexual tension between Bond and his "girl," Vesper Lynd, the two have never engaged in sexual intimacy. Thus, considering the audience's perception of the composite Bond icon as a virile male, and the lack of sexual activity in the film up until this point, the subtext of homosexuality in the torture scene can be understood as a climactic moment in which Bond rejects Le Chiffre's homosexual advances and affirms his heterosexuality. The scene thereby performs an important function in the formation of Bond's identity for both this film and those the audience understands to occur after it: it proves Bond's masculinity and foreshadows his choice at the end of the film to privilege duty, physical prowess, and arrogance over a life of love and companionship.

In order to understand the import of this torture scene, it is necessary to trace Bond's maturation through *Casino Royale*. Viewers first meet Bond as he receives his 007 status, and quickly understand him to be an arrogant, reckless agent, who is unable to see the "whole picture": the complex web of connections and dangers behind the immediate jobs that M assigns him. Bond is determined and powerful, but, as M complains, "any thug can kill"; he is witty but neither subtle nor discriminating. Bond is also above the law—an MI-6 operative with a newly acquired license to kill. As a result, even when he misuses his power by storming an embassy and killing a man wanted alive, and is subsequently censured by the British press, he suffers little consequence. Cognizant of his clout, Bond is unequivocally arrogant. His early interactions with M and his love interest Vesper Lynd thus seem to be fencing matches rather than conversations, as each woman challenges his egotism. Yet despite his propensity for charm, Bond lacks the effortless style of the debonair; a graduate of Oxford or somewhere comparable, he nonetheless seems more unease with wealth than the Bonds of old, and wears his suit with a hint of disdain.

Needing to maintain appearances at the ritzy resort hosting Le Chiffre's high-stakes poker game, however, Bond seems to be learning nuance by the middle of the film. Though his early missions have been executed in casual street wear, it is at the resort in Montenegro that Bond, with the help of Vesper, dons his first tuxedo of the film. At last in the dinner jacket that is his trademark, viewers watch Bond concoct the martinis that are his signature. His egotism slightly tempered by the middle of the film, Bond also begins to show tenderness: in possibly the most passionate shower scene of the entire franchise, he comforts Vesper, emotionally shaken from her close witness of death—with his clothes on. Yet, despite all, Bond is still heroically tough: able to eclipse the average man with such feats as killing two terrorists in a stairwell with his bare hands, and returning to his poker game only minutes after being poisoned into cardiac arrest.

Throughout the film, Bond has been attempting to define his masculinity by negotiating relationships between the self-indulgence of luxury and the perspicacity necessitated by duty, between arrogance and vulnerability, and between his feelings and his brute force. Appearing relatively late in the film, the torture scene further matures Bond's character by reifying this negotiation through literal attacks on his manhood. In the scene, Bond fully claims and safeguards his masculine identity, despite the risk of castration: firstly, by refusing to reveal his
that establishes him as the dominant male.125 Simultaneously, this convalescence period presents Bond at his most humble and unguarded, more vulnerable in scenes with Vesper than he ever was during his torture.126 It is thus at his most vulnerable that Bond most demonstrates his virility; telling Vesper that he loves her, that he has no armor behind which to hide, he ultimately decides to resign his job so that they can create a life together. As the rough-and-tumble lovemaking is followed by several scenes of a more tender and intimate nature, the audience is presented with a Bond who has learned to strengthen and affirm his masculinity through commune with a feminine equal. Though he begins the film with a penchant for married women, who come without strings attached, Bond finds in the intelligent and poised Vesper a partner for whom he is willing to forsake his machismo. In this way, he seems to renounce the type of masculinity espoused by Bauer, whose sexuality is never witnessed, whose guard is never down, and who never puts a personal relationship before his duty.

Yet this contented Bond does not end the story. For after a few days of bliss, Vesper’s hypocrisy is revealed. After learning of her betrayal and watching her consign herself to death, the Bond who closes the film is the hardened icon we know—dressed to kill, trusting no one. In the film’s final moments, as Bond rejects both the possibility that Vesper may have loved him and the emotional depth he found with her, he hastens to his next assignment recognizably injured. The closing scene presents him in perfect form—standing tall above his prostrate enemy, immaculately dressed and face hardened, gripping an enormous gun.

The audience, however, leaves the film knowing that Bond’s tough exterior hides a tender lover, wounded and betrayed, who has returned to his job with a vengeance—a romantic

125 “Now the whole world’s gonna know that you died scratching my balls!” and “No, no, no, no...to the right, to the right, to the right!”

124 This process resembles Eisenstein’s understanding of the “pathos formula” in relation to religious art, in which suffering religious figures become purified through their suffering.

125 It is only after the torture scene that Bond becomes the object of Vesper’s erotic gaze—that she calls him more of a man than anyone she has ever met.

126 As he assures Vesper, “I have no armor left. You’ve stripped it from me. Whatever is left of me...I’m yours.”
who can perform his duty with insouciance and is comfortable in democratic relationship with a woman. The overwhelming popularity of Daniel Craig’s new incarnation of Bond is undoubtedly a product of Craig’s ability to grant the character such depths of emotional complexity, even as his physique—with its sturdy musculature not perfectly tailored for the elegance of the tuxedo, his ears a bit awkwardly placed on his weathered face—appears a more “manly” version of sexy than the tall, slim, and handsome Pierce Brosnan. Craig’s Bond relies less on technology (for his own physical strength is more than sufficient) and is less comfortable with commodities; filled with free-running stunts, his action sequences also seem more real. Yet he is also more attuned to the seemingly feminine aspects of his personality, navigating his masculinity vis-à-vis the effeminacy of luxury, vulnerability, and threat of castration. Thus in Craig, the Bond figure becomes not only a hero capable of upholding the world order against terrorism, but also a hero with the capacity for feeling.

Despite his epic feats, Bond’s emotional depth makes him seem real. Though he is every bit as brusque as Bauer, he is also more nuanced and glamorous; and thus, though we want to be protected by both men, and perhaps aspire to their tough manner, we only want to be (or be romantized by) Bond. While cadets might profess Bauerism in the classroom or emulate the techniques Bauer uses in the interrogation chamber, few would espouse his untenable life of constant emergency and isolation. Bond, on the other hand, offers audiences more than just a sense of security and efficacy; he offers them reassurance that heroes need not be invulnerable. As a man who can be strengthened by and overcome his unhappy experiences, Craig’s Bond reassures American audiences that they too will rebound from their injury.127

127 Alexis Albin, “Wanting to Be James Bond,” in Ian Fleming and James Bond, edited by Edward P. Comentale, Stephen Watt, and Skip Willman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 214. It is thus no surprise that British forces in 2003 named an operation in Iraq, "Operation James," and its targets “Goldfinger” and “Bofeld,” in an attempt to elevate troop morale. (“Goldfinger” and “Bofeld” are two the villains in earlier Bond films.) Here once again we see fantastic figures making an intervention into real life.
The film is more theatrical than 24 or Casino Royale: not only do its characters wear outlandish costumes, appear more gruesome, and bear names like “The Joker,” “Two Face,” and “Batman,” but these figures also are embedded in a world occasionally characterized by special-effect explosions. The microcosm of Gotham City, in which the film is set, is also depicted in grimmer tones: it is perennially overcast and teeming with criminals and deceit. Here, the world is both literally and figuratively grayer than we actually know it, and the audience is asked to dwell within the assumption that evil verges on triumphing over this comic book city.

Dressed like a bat and with an ominous-sounding voice, the Batman in *The Dark Knight* is intrinsically fantastic. Unlike Bauer or Bond, his perceived duty is not to serve his country (though most viewers will understand him to be an American and Gotham to be New York City), but rather to protect humanity: he is a vigilante operating under a higher law. His personal life, like Bauer’s, always takes a backseat to his commitment to protecting Gotham from evil. When Batman is forced to sacrifice his love interest, Rachel, in order to save the city’s upright District Attorney, Harvey Dent, Batman’s last hope for a regaining a normal life is dashed. Like Bauer, he is a social outcast: isolated, sexually frustrated, with few confidants.

*The Dark Knight* is concerned not with Batman’s identity so much as with the moral authority, responsibilities, and categories of the hero figure. The film challenges, and then reaffirms, Batman’s incorruptibility, his unwavering faith in human goodness. Inclined toward a system of Kantian ethics that judges actions and intentions equally by liberal humanist conceptions of natural law, Batman explicitly renounces the validity of murder—even for the purpose of eradicating evil. In this way, he can be understood as a figure diametrically opposed to both Jack Bauer and the utilitarian figure employed by the ticking time bomb scenario; for in refusing to kill, Batman also refuses to stoop to the rules—or lack of rules—of his nemesis in order to defeat them. He upholds ideals; he has a conscience; he feels sorrow when others die on his watch. In *The Dark Knight*, violence does not clarify or purify, its mere existence causes the hero emotional and psychological pain.

The absoluteness of Batman’s moral system, however, is challenged by the complex reality of evil in Gotham City. For most of the film, Batman must attempt to negotiate a path toward avenging inexorable evil without becoming it. Ambivalent about the appropriate relationship that civic protectors should have with the law, he is plagued by doubts as to whether he should turn himself in to the police, and face the consequences for his vigilantism, or remain an outlaw that protects the city. At the end of the film, despite his desire to meet the consequences of his actions, abrogate his guilt, and regain a normal life, Batman affirms the necessity of remaining outside the legal system—even as he maintains that the law is the ideal mechanism for protecting Gotham’s citizenry. He embraces his ambiguous position outside of the juridical system, and well as the social one, as the concession he must make in order to protect a city so threatened by crime; vigilantism is the burden his conscience must bear.

Batman thus lurks in the shadowy region between order and chaos, operating outside of the rule of positive law so as to move Gotham back toward law’s order. He considers his actions to be assisting the broken legal system again become self-supporting. At the heart of this philosophy is the belief that “Gotham needs a hero with a face,” a hero like District Attorney Harvey Dent, who can protect the city from within the system. Recognizing himself as

128 Much of *The Dark Knight* deals overtly with the law—in scenes of courtroom drama, and in a plot pivots upon judges, District attorneys, legal cases, and interrogation—and it exhibits characters with varying attitudes toward the importance of upholding the rule of law. For instance, Dent feels the rule of law can be temporarily suspended for Batman, given the urgency of the present moment, but that Batman should be held accountable later; Alfred believes Batman should remain above the law; Lieutenant Gordon sees Batman as a necessary mechanism for upholding the law when Gotham’s law enforcement cannot.
fundamentally divorced from and in contrast with such ostensibly upright civic officials as Dent, Batman makes it clear that he believes himself and Dent to represent two separate categories of public servants: one which works in and is responsible to the light of the law, and one who operate in the darkness beyond it. The scenes of interrogation in The Dark Knight are largely sites in which he makes this distinction explicit. Though the interrogation scenes are less unequivocally understood to depict acts of torture than those examined above, for they more resemble "torture lite," the scenes nonetheless establish torture as an extralegal act inherent to the state of exception, and expressly mark it as antithetical to the self-sustaining legal system for which Batman strives.

The film’s first interrogation scene depicts Harvey Dent preparing to torture a man that Dent believes possesses information about the Joker’s plans for injuring Dent’s girlfriend. Though Dent has no real intention of hurting the man—the intimidation is a bluff, for the man’s life is not in danger—neither Dent’s prisoner nor Batman knows this to be true. Believing that Dent, a civic official, is about to step beyond the rule of law, Batman intervenes. Informing the District Attorney that the man he has captured is in fact a paranoid schizophrenic, hardly an individual with the salient information he desires, Batman chastises Dent’s reckless recourse to such dark measures. He is certain that resorting to torture would both damage Dent psychologically and compromise his political and moral authority, and in so doing, inhibit the civic official’s ability to perform his duty of leading Gotham toward a more just future.

Yet in the second interrogation scene, we learn that, although Batman deems it wrong for civic officials like Dent or Gordon to engage in extralegal activity like torture, he considers his own social role to bear a capacity, perhaps even a duty, for such behavior. Presented with a scenario in which the deaths of both Dent and Rachel are imminent, Batman claims torture as a possibility for outlaws: waiting until after Police Commission Gordon exits the interrogation room, Batman aggressively beats the Joker until he discloses Dent’s and Rachel’s whereabouts.

Batman quickly obtains the information he seeks, however, not because his actions cause significant fear or pain, but because the Joker had planned on telling Batman in the first place. Lying prostrate before Batman and laughing, the Joker reveals that his capture and interrogation had been expected all along. In this way, the Joker is not only relatively uninjured by Batman’s brutal behavior, but, moreover, remains unrealistically in control of his own experience of torture. 129

While the information that the Joker divulges is true, Batman is nevertheless unable to save both Dent and Rachel; Dent’s body is badly burned, and Rachel perishes in an explosion. Despite the torture, the Joker’s plot succeeds. The only instance of Batman’s aggression in the film, the scene seems to represent a moment of fear and weakness that is essentially incapable of rectifying the predicament in which Batman finds himself: torn between his anxiety about Rachel and his perceived duty of saving the city’s District Attorney. Considering the film’s treatment of torture as an act that needs considerable qualification and risks inefficacy or uselessness, The Dark Knight can be understood to promulgate the most complicated, indeed the most realistic, attitudes toward torture in any of the productions under scrutiny.

Batman’s insistence that there are two different classes of public servants and contexts in which the torture act should be viewed speak to the film’s more general theme of undermining rigid categorizations of actions, ideas, or people. In particular, the film is concerned with destabilizing dichotomies of “good” and “evil.” Even as The Dark Knight affirms the existence of incorruptible good (Batman) and incorrigible evil (The Joker), much of the film works to

129 In an inversion of the torturer-victim relationship of Casino Royale, in this case it is the hero who enacts the violence, the arch nemesis who maintains an equal footing via verbal cunning.
assert that most actions, ideas, and people, fall somewhere in between. Several characters demonstrate their capacity to operate as two selves and thus elude easy categorization: citizen Bruce Wayne/vigilante Batman, District Attorney Harvey Dent/villain Two Face, detective Ramirez/traitor Ramirez.130 Even Gotham’s criminal underbelly is revealed as a spectrum ranging from individuals like the Joker, who kill for enjoyment, and those like the mob, who act out of self-interest and greed. The film in this way refuses to allow binary oppositions between good and evil to govern its moral universe; instead of attempting to classify all characters into such strict categories, the films allows them to operate within the gray area that is Gotham city.

As Batman’s ethical system is challenged by his attempts to reconcile an aversion to killing with the existence of unadulterated evil, and find a means for avenging evil without himself becoming it, the hero proposes the possibility of a space outside the law for moral individuals to execute higher law—but explicitly rejects that this space is compatible with the responsibilities of civic officials. In other words, while Batman does not deny that it is sometimes necessary to move beyond rule of law, he nonetheless expressly clarifies that the obligation for doing so should not involve those who are responsible to the public. For Batman, such hypocrisy is immoral, and undermines the transparency of and faith in the political structure that enables it to properly function.

These themes of critical reflection and constant qualification can be understood as a challenge to the normative context pervading post-9/11 America (while several of the film’s individual scenes can be understood more specifically as critiques of particular policies of the state of exception).131 While for much of The Dark Knight it seems the uncertainty and chaos ruling Gotham have rendered citizens so fearful that they will readily cast aside their rules and sell their ideals—shooting others or flouting the law—in attempt to ensure their self-preservation, the film concludes with a resounding rejection of fear in favor of common humanity: when two ferries full of passengers (one with average citizens and one with dangerous criminals, which have been pitted against each other by the Joker) refuse to save themselves by sending the other to its death. Their reclaiming of a mutual humanity and dignity (despite the intense prejudices of the average citizens and the experience in killing of the criminals), thwart the Joker’s ultimate goal of manifesting Gotham’s hypocritical tendency to uphold ideals only when they are convenient. In a very important way, it is these citizens, and not Batman, who ultimately save the city; though Batman heroically captures the Joker, it is the citizenry who demonstrate that despite the crime in Gotham’s streets, evil will never conquer the city. Harvey Dent, the one man who allows trauma and catastrophe to destroy faith in his ideals, and who believes it impossible to be “decent men in an indecent time,” is killed.

The significance of this message to a U.S. audience cannot be overlooked. Just like the citizens of Gotham living in fear of the Joker, after 9/11 the nation too cast aside its rules and ideals with the hope of gaining security. The film exhorts viewers, however, not to allow themselves to be forever mired in a zeitgeist of fear and anxiety. Rather, it advocates a reclamation of liberal humanist principles, asserting that citizens do not need heroic civic defenders like Batman so much as their own defense of ideals to be saved from evil.

130 Detective Ramirez, Lieutenant Gordon’s closest associate, joins forces with the mob to earn money for her mother’s medical expenses. She operates as both a good detective and a disloyal traitor alternatively through out the film.

131 More specific policies of the state of exception like torture and domestic surveillance are also questioned by the film; both are rejected as unjustifiable when utilized by civic officials, and validated when utilized by the outlaw Batman for exceptional cases. Batman, however, acknowledges the unfortunate nature of these practices and regrets their necessity. It is the recourse to such acts that makes him feel remorseful of the burdens of his duty.
It is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that The Dark Knight also comments briefly on the inherent danger in attempting to emulate super human heroes: those who wander Gotham City as Batman impersonators not only complicate life for Batman, but are actually exploited by the Joker so as to endanger the lives of other citizens. These copy-cat Batmans cannot differentiate Batman from themselves; they do not understand what gives him the right to act above the law. Batman warns them that he is “not wearing hockey pads”—meaning that he is prepared, trained, and equipped for dangerous situations, that he has recognized the ethical consequences of his behavior, in a manner they have not. Not cognizant of the underlying prerequisites justifying Batman’s behavior, or at least constraining it, they see Batman as a one of themselves. In other words, because the imposters overlook Batman’s qualifications and his self-conscious habitation of a shadowy moral ground, they see him merely as an average citizen who is acting heroically above the law. Consequently, their desire to emulate him becomes dangerous, because they lack his physical and psychological preparation and because their actions produce outcomes far different from what they intend or expect.

Though Batman is not a “fantastic figure” to these imposters in the same sense he is to audiences, both the imposters and some real-world film viewers share a similar inability to recognize underlying assumptions and presumptions. Real-world emulation of fantastic hero figures like Jack Bauer, James Bond, or Batman, by viewers who disregard the fantastic premises underwriting these heroes’ worlds and action (like the emulation of Bauer’s torture techniques by interrogators or West Point cadets) can produce similarly dangerous outcomes that differ greatly from those witnessed on screen. Still worse, such treatment of the fantastic characters as realistic figures facilitates their assimilation into our consciousness without the assumptions that the film world attaches to them; thus, as we incorporate them into our consciousness we risk...
Chapter Four. Torture and Responsibility: Toward a Tenable Accountability

Hannah Arendt once wrote, “there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them.”132 Convinced that collective guilt only exculpates the individuals who are responsible, Arendt argued that “where all are guilty, nobody is” (Arendt “Collective Responsibility”). Her statements are cause for consideration. I mentioned in my introduction the guilt that accompanied my apprehension of torture’s role in the War on Terror—guilt over a failure to respond to this revelation in what I deemed the appropriate and expected manner. This reaction needs to be discriminated from feelings of personal responsibility for the act of torture itself. I felt angry about the use of torture by U.S. operatives. I felt embarrassed that I belonged to a political community capable of performing such acts. I believed that the torture was an injustice I had a duty to contend. But I did not feel private guilt for it.

As Arendt’s comments would suggest, I instead felt culpable for the aspect of the situation for which I understood myself to have personal responsibility: the civic response. My belief in the equal dignity of every human being, in the reproachfulness of the act of torture, and in the importance of the rule of law, made torture an act that necessitated a civic response; my upbringing in the normative context of liberal democracy and ideology of liberal humanism had established that the proper form of response to injustice was political engagement using the state’s designated channels for dissent, particularly influence on the legislative branch. Yet I nonetheless did not respond in this anticipated way. I did not write my Congressman nor join Amnesty International. These actions, I felt, would amount to nothing more than waste of a few

moments of my time. Instead, feeling angry about but powerless in the situation, I began talking to people about it, reading about it, and writing about it.

This thesis is an attempt to understand why I reacted the way I did, and why I felt I needed to respond in a particular manner—but also why others were similarly politically disengaged. For though I had expected a public outcry after the collective social body learned of torture’s relative prevalence in the War on Terror, the public has never cried. It seems that perhaps this silence reflects a civic incapacity in the state of exception governing the U.S. post-9/11 to demand answerability; restricting the channels for dissent and accountability over the past eight years likely rendered impotent many who would have liked to engage in public outcry.

There is something profoundly cynical about the official response of the Bush administration: secretly redefining torture133 only so that it could proclaim that in the United States “We do not torture.”134 Yet perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the situation is the degree to which elements of civil society, rather than the political structure, embraced the necessity of torture and approved it before it was used— overtly forsaking a traditional ideology of common humanity in order to embrace an ideology of anxiety and prejudice. Approbation and encouragement of policies that protected U.S. security at all costs came from many fronts: a


133 It did so in a collection of secret memoranda that officially reinterpreted international and constitutional law. These infamous torture memos discussing the legal status of torture were disseminated between the White House, State Department, Department of Defense, and Justice Department. The most influential were issued from the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, and stated that the Geneva conventions did not apply to members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban (this was subsequently translated into President Bush’s famous memoranda and into the Military Commissions Act of 2006) and that psychological torture and “torture lite” do not constitute torture because they do not impart “lasting damage.” The memoranda are rooted in reinterpretation of statutory law, presidential authority, and the self-defense, as a justification for the War on Terror writ large as well as its policies. See Jane Mayer, interview by Scott Horton, “Six Questions for Jane Mayer, Author of The Dark Side,” Harper’s Magazine, July 14, 2008.

tacit moral sanction from the evangelical religious base, the implicit xenophobia of a fearful public, the "moral myopia" of the bureaucracy, the unquestioning hierarchy of the military, and the willing inattention of the public (Luban 11453-55). Indeed, the degree to which these civic attitudes and behaviors actually engendered a normative context in which the political structure could expand its power and reduce civil liberties is more unsettling than the fact that political actors actually overstepped their bounds and infringed on individual rights, because liberal humanism has always functioned principally as a hegemonic governing ideology rather than as a historical reality. When liberal humanism is renounced at an ideological level, there is little motivation for enforcing its rights and tenets politically, and thus it becomes dually unable to guide or restrain our actions.

After considering the ways that the mediums through which the public knows about torture (i.e. representations) can facilitate distance between victims and the public, the manner in which torture narratives in mainstream culture promote misperceptions of the act and what it does, and the social and identity crises that constrained U.S. citizens in the post-9/11 period, we can hardly find surprising the lack of a public outcry. To recognize these sources of public disengagement with torture in the War on Terror, however, is only half the battle. For as U.S. citizens who took part in the creation of a milieu engendering torture, we are in a position of mutual culpability that suggests our civic responsibilities now extend beyond merely acknowledging its use. This complicitous accountability, as Timothy Kaufman-Osborn explains, is not to be confused with the liberal legal doctrine of complicity, which holds that an individual can be held culpable for another's crime...[but a notion] predicated on a relational understanding of conduct...as a consequence of joint enmeshment

in complex and historically-specified constellations of power relations, such co-implication is for the most part fruit of habitual submission to the current order of things. (Kaufman-Osborn, under “From Liberal Guilt to Complicitous Accountability”)

The invisible power structures in which we are situated as U.S. citizens, and in which we participate through the production, consumption, and digestion of cultural forms, entangle us in mutual complicity with the actions of physical power structures operating in society—to the extent that even our inactions, our inattentions, and our “habitual submission to the current order of things” are significant determinants in a process of political, economic, and cultural world-ordering (Kaufman-Osborn, under “From Liberal Guilt to Complicitous Accountability”). These networks of relational power are engendered and reinforced by our behavior, and they can be disconnected by our conduct as well. Our complicitous culpability therefore renders us liable for the sanction and use of torture in the War on Terror, while our liberal humanist tradition suggests we are responsible to do something about it—but what?

I. Enlightened Hypocrisy

Historically, the United States has been seen as a chief advocate of liberal humanism and egalitarianism across the globe. While this thesis is not intended to be an extensive comment on the legitimacy of U.S. practices of cultural imperialism, it is worth noting that our tradition of spreading liberal humanist principles is completely undermined by use of a practice they expressly forbid. By overlooking the rights by which the United States measures the “development” and status of other nations when those rights seem inconvenient, the message the nation sends is clear: we will judge you by your ability to practice the ideals of the
Enlightenment, but not ourselves. This hypocritical neglect makes our revered rights seem a
front for less altruistic aims. If we want to serve ostensibly benevolent culturally imperialistic
foreign policy aims in the future, we cannot ignore the tenets that underwrite them in the present.
(If it is so easy to make a case against upholding the equal dignity of all men, of privileging the
rule of law, why should Americans trample across the globe attempting to instill such values in
states like Iraq and Afghanistan? What rights have we to tout Enlightenment ideals, when we
overlook them ourselves? Could anyone take us seriously in such ventures?)

U.S. policy in the War on Terror has only demonstrated the hypocrisy of our
Enlightenment project of spreading egalitarianism. We have yet to see whether the attempt to
spread liberal democratic ideals will take root in Iraq or Afghanistan, but we have already begun
to notice the ways that their domestic neglect has proved problematic (Slaughter, Human Rights
Inc. 326). As Mark Danner has noticed, “the decision to torture, in a political war with militant
Islam, [has] harmed American interests by destroying the democratic and Constitutional
reputation of the United States, undermining its liberal sympathizers in the Muslim world and
helping materially in the recruitment of young Muslims to the extremist cause” (Danner).

Instead of demonstrating the significance of rights, and their ability to help us weather difficult
situations, desertion of our ideals and our liberal democratic framework has only granted other
nations a successful example for ignoring or overlooking them, and suggested that obligations to
international charters are minimal. If we ignore the Geneva Conventions, why should other
nations not ignore them as well?

Those who are critical of strict adherence to rule of law during moments of emergency
will remark that the nation has shifted toward the state of exception many times over the course
of its history. Indeed, similar transformations to the political structure occurred in varying
degrees during the Civil War, the Fist World War, the Great Depression, and the Second World
War. It is for this reason that WWI saw such excessive punishment of dissent and sedition, the
Great Depression witnessed total regulation of all economic activity, and WWII witnessed the
internment of seventy thousand Japanese-Americans—hardly moments for which the United
States should be proud or wish to repeat (Agamben 20-22).

Critics of strict adherence to international law will say that international legal obligations
are hardly enforceable, that time and again signers have flouted their obligations—especially
those inhibiting the use of torture. Indeed, Oona Hathaway has demonstrated that signers of the
1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or
Punishment are not necessarily less likely to use torture than non-signers. The signing of
international treaties banning torture does not inherently or drastically reduce torture’s
prevalence, for international law is undeniably difficult to enforce (Hathaway 200). Many
international laws lack effective enforcement mechanisms, and as a result, are reliant on
domestic institutions to enforce compliance; domestic institutions that have either incorporated
such tenets into their own statutory law or see enforcement as necessary to maintaining their own
reputation are an important means by which international law is policed (Hathaway 209).

Accordingly, often the most effective means for observance of international accords comes from
within, rather than outside of, individual states.  

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135 Oona A. Hathaway, “The Promise and Limits of the International Law of Torture,” in
Non-democratic nations that use torture more than average are actually quite likely to sign such
treaties—in order to gain an "enlightened" reputation by natioss like our own that judge
according to such standards. Signing these types of agreements can translate into prestige,
foreign investment, and humanitarian aid, among other benefits, for these states.

136 The 1984 Convention charges all signers with the moral responsibility of prosecuting
Thus, when U.S. domestic institutions disregard rule of law, they simultaneously disregard their tacit responsibility for effecting the self-enforcement that underwrites the institution of international law. Since political actors often have incentive to extend their power and disobey legal statutes, it becomes civil society’s responsibility to maintain international legal obligations via litigation, media exposure, and political confrontation (Hathaway 205). Because the reality of politics in praxis makes it unlikely that an international body would extradite a U.S. national who served in a high status political office, or that the Bush administration that left office unremorseful of its policies would willingly submit itself to litigation or media exposure, it is the responsibility of the political body and its juridical institutions to call for attention to and enforcement of our legal obligations.\footnote{These officials could conceivably be accosted in visits to other countries who have signed the charter, however, if they willingly entered such countries (Sands, Fresh Air). See also Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, “Terror-War Fallout Lingers Over Bush Lawyers,” The New York Times, March 8, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/09/washington/09lawyers.html?ref=us.} We must reclaim our liberal ideals by avowing the importance of rule of law and upholding self-enforcing our international obligations.

II. The Bush Administration’s Dirty Hands

As Michael Walzer famously demonstrated in his essay “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” there are certain circumstances in which what we expect of our public officials stands at odds with what we construe as good or moral conduct: moments when our demand that political officials defend and protect us is directly challenged by our demand that they behave according to certain ethical principles. When these two demands come into contention, often the nature of an official’s civic office will trump other considerations, causing him or her to carry out actions that “dirty” his or her hands.

Such dilemmas are unavoidable, indeed anticipated, in political life. Their inevitability, however, does not imply that the “dirty” actions they stipulate should be ignored. Moreover, it does not mean that the political officials who perform the acts should be exempt from the consequences of the decisions that dirty their hands. Rather, when a “dirty” act is illegal, it should continued to be treated as such, despite an official’s putative need to perform it; any official who deems an illicit act the lesser evil and consequently performs it should be required afterward to justify its necessity before a group of peers.\footnote{Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” in Torture: A Collection, ed. Sanford Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68.} As individuals willing to sacrifice the cleanliness of their hands in the name of a greater good, political officials should also be willing to acknowledge the stain on their hands, and accept the punishment attached to the crime by the juridical body. Only then can the official’s civic integrity be redeemed. To ignore his or her guilt belies the commitment to duty which presumably prompted the action that dirtied his or her hands in the first place. Walzer notes that, in a liberal Democracy, citizens have the legal right and ethical responsibility to demand more than melancholia from a politician who sanctions the use of torture when we find torture legally and ethically reprehensible (Walzer 65). Even when officials find their personal actions justifiable in certain exigent circumstances, even if they personally do not find torture unethical, they are nonetheless responsible to the rules of the body politic they represent and from which they derive their political authority.

Yet far from acknowledging the dirt on its hands or accepting the legal consequences of violating the law, the Bush administration continuously denied its sanction of torture in the War on Terror. While it ultimately did not deny that events like water-boarding, excessive force, and sexual degradation occurred, it claimed that these behaviors are not what they seem and have traditionally been labeled: torture. Instead, it redefined the act of torture, reinterpreting
international legal texts so as to limit the scope of practices defining the act. It moreover justified “enhanced interrogation techniques” (a euphemism first adopted by the Gestapo during another state of exception) by arguing that the constitutional powers of the presidency grant him authority to manage the military uninhibited. As the phrase “enhanced interrogation methods” came to signify the acts traditionally and internationally known as torture, similar games of semantics were played on the definition of “prisoner”—which was relabeled with the signifiers “detainee” and “unlawful combatant”—so as to evade the POW conventions outlined by international accords (Mayer, “Six Questions”). These legal precautions, most of which were done in secret, can be tacitly understood as cognizance of guilt: the Bush administration would not have taken such measures to protect itself, if it had not recognized that its policies were legally ambiguous or explicitly punishable by law.

President Bush’s lack of public retrospection or ethical reflection on his administration’s policies and their ramifications positions him, in terms of Walzer’s essay, as a man lacking in political morality: “if he were a moral man and nothing else, his hands would not be dirty; if he were a politician and nothing else, he would pretend that [his hands] were clean” (Walzer 65).

While the moral politician would acknowledge that his hands were dirty, but that the reason for

their defilement was a moral one, instead, the former President and his administration pretended its hands were clean. Indeed, the administration denied its sanction of torture and upheld support for “enhanced interrogation” to the very last: “We do not torture.”

To quote Walzer again, the moral politician’s “willingness to acknowledge and bear...his guilt is the only evidence he can offer us, both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough” (Walzer 68). When an official does not offer us this evidence, how can we recognize him as either a politician good enough to put aside his personal concerns for the sake of the body politic or as an individual moral enough to accept the consequences of his actions? It is through performing the task that dirties his hands, and then accepting responsibility for it, that such a man can prove his ability to be both.

It seems apparent that the Bush administration viewed its “dirty” actions as necessary perils undertaken for the security of the nation; the state of exception by which it governed was predicated on the conviction that such emergency circumstances characterized the historical moment and rendered such actions necessary. Although arguable, this belief is one to which the former administration is entitled. The necessity of an action, however, does not make it any less lamentable or illegal. Instead of publicly recognizing that torture seemed requisite, and later regretting, repenting, or at least lamenting it (and consequently reminding the public of the dangerous inhumanity and illegality of sanctioning such actions), the administration instead defended its policies with fervor. If the continuous public disclosures that the United States was using torture had been answered by the administration with statements of remorseful justification—“it is an unfortunate fact, but we felt that such actions were necessary...”—its

139 This justification of course is predicated on a highly contestable understanding of the War on Terror itself as an action of self-defense and the post-9/11 era as an interminable state emergency.

140 President Bush largely defended “enhanced interrogation techniques” by claiming that they work. However, he based his entire argument on a single case, which he misrepresented. He stated firstly that Abu Zubayda told the C.I.A. under torture the name of the individual who authored 9/11, when the agency already had this information before Zubayda’s torture. He secondly stated the Zubayda revealed the name of an al-Qaeda figure that was plotting another attack, but failed to mention that this information also came before torture was applied. He finally added that Zubayda provided information enabling capture of another terrorist, though other sources have suggested that this information was garnered from an interview the unnamed other terrorist gave al Jazeera.

141 Similarly, members of the intelligence community would not have purchased professional liability insurance if they saw their actions as guiltless or permissible.

142 Of course, it should not be forgotten that the administration worked consistently through its tenure to expand the powers of the executive, and interpret domestic law in order to expand these powers.
integrity could have at least been salvaged. Recognizing the broken laws would have meant the administration acknowledged the liberal democratic framework governing the nation, and the importance of maintaining it; would have been an avowal of torture’s status as a reprehensible practice. Instead, the administration chose to uphold a position that signified the executive branch’s right to operate outside rule of law without consequence and to reject the constitution in exigent situations—in short, it chose a veiled state of exception. And consequently, its hands are unequivocally dirty and the extent of its morality is undeniably suspect.

III. The State of Exception and (Lack of) Accountability

The interrogation community lacks consensus about the efficacy of torture’s use in the War on Terror (Bellamy 138). As Jane Mayer has pointed out, conversations with top officials suggest that many find torture produces too much misinformation, while others are sure they have proof of its usefulness in protecting citizens from terrorist plots after September 11th (Mayer “Six Questions”). Torture apologists and denouncers alike argue that the facts necessary to substantiate claims of torture’s value as an information-gathering tool are kept in the deep vaults of “intelligence” agencies around the world; while some of these documents are slowly reaching the public eye, most remain hidden.

I would argue, however, that evidence of torture’s ineffectiveness is in plain sight: a history of situations in which the act produced more false information than veracious (Langbein 98). More importantly, however, I would argue that such questions of efficacy are irrelevant, considering torture’s status a domestically and internationally outlawed practice antithetical to truth and justice: the practice not only overwhelmingly disempowers subjects to the extent that their ability to recount information with integrity is undermined, and not only operates as an arbitrary exercise of power that purports to but is not informed by justice, but torture also delegitimizes accountability for individuals who have actually, rather than speculatively, done wrong.

Evidence produced under torture is not legally valid; judges often refuse to adjudicate cases in which a victim has been tortured. Consequently, after individuals who have violated laws are tortured—as is the case with many of the “high-value” detainees who were tortured in the War on Terror—they can no longer be held accountable for their legal violations. Justice is thus dually obstructed: first in the execution of the torture act and second in the lack of answerability by tortured individuals who are guilty of possibly flagrant infractions of the law.

In a state of exception, policies that obscure justice and circumvent law are the norm. Even the ground on which the post-9/11 state of exception stands is legally dubious: although suspension of habeas corpus is constitutionally justified in singular exigent situations, rampant expansion of emergency powers and interminable extension of the “emergency situation” is not. Power consolidation in the executive branch, a process inherent to the state of exception’s notion that decisiveness and unitary power provides security, inevitably diminishes the traditional liberal democratic mechanisms for checking power. With rule of law in abeyance, judicial authority denied in favor of the military, and checks and balances blurred, the legal norms of the post-9/11 state of exception cleared the way for political officials to reject accountability for their legal infractions.

Torture thrives in such settings. During the War on Terror, the state of exception’s constantly shifting and blurry demarcations between who is authorized to operate outside the rule of law and when they are authorized to do so, enabled torture to spread through the chain of

command. Though the highly secret special access program (SAP) that sanctioned torture was at first limited to high-value terrorists who might reasonably be thought to possess necessary, or at least very useful, information, the program was soon adopted for Abu Ghraib at large—with the possibility of application even to “cabbies, brothers-in-law, and people pulled off the streets,” who might not have any information at all (Hersh “Annals of National Security: The Gray Zone.”). When the SAP was extended to personnel beyond those experienced, trained, and originally authorized for it, control was soon lost.

The Obama administration is in many ways shifting the nation away from these legal ambiguities and infractions, back toward the framework of the Constitution: President Obama’s executive orders, signed the day after he took office, have ostensibly prohibited torture, halted the tribunals trying Guantanamo prisoners, and called for the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison by 2010. Generally it seems that the United States is returning to liberal democracy—a very heartening observation. Nonetheless, we cannot forget that the past eight years happened. In order for the nation to truly reclaim its liberal humanist ideals, we must both acknowledge our collective disavowal of them during the state of exception and apply their principles toward those who espoused policies contrary to them; we must not only adhere once again to rule of law, but also demonstrate our willingness to let it guide us through uncomfortable situations and rehabilitate legal offenders. Laws were violated, and the officials responsible should be held accountable. Disregarding the illegality of the policies of the state of exception now that we are regaining liberal democratic normalcy will only make the possibility of the state’s recurrence all too likely, all too easy.

While we cannot undo the pain inflicted on others by our peers, we can demonstrate our regret and act to prevent atrocities like torture from happening again. Accountability provides closure for victims and perpetrators alike, offering punishment as a step toward reconciliation. While the damage has already been done—to the bodies and minds of victims, to their families, to the United States’ global reputation, even to the psyches of those who inflicted the pain—and while Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have already become symbols recruiting insurgents to work against U.S. interests,145 public demonstration of accountability would nonetheless serve as a step toward reconciliation.146

IV. Responsibility in the Era of Obama

Arguably, the election of President Obama in November of 2008 is a product and manifestation of the nation’s shift away from the normative context engendering the state of exception—away from the feelings of powerlessness and fear that predicated it—toward a reclaiming of liberal humanist ideals and reaffirmation of governance by the rule of law. In many ways, the 2008 election can be understood as a rejection of the privileging of security over all other national interests. As the political climate grew less approving of the Bush administration’s policies, and its treatment of additional catastrophes (Hurricane Katrina, the current economic crisis) and underhanded operations (Abu Ghraib, the Alberto Gonzales scandal), faith in the ability of an expanded executive branch and neoconservative tenets to provide for the general welfare was gradually lost.

Mainstream American culture has also seen a shift away from all-American Jack Bauer figures, suggesting that the audiences to which such heroes appealed are now less needing of Bauer-like unconscionable masculine hero figures to answer anxieties regarding effeminacy or insecurity. Not only have the past few years seen an increase in hero figures with psyches and vulnerability (like Bond), but they have also seen more heroes with a consciously complicated and uncomfortable relationship to ethics and the law (like Batman).\footnote{For example, Hancock in \textit{Hancock}, Jason Bourne in the \textit{Bourne} series, Billy Costigan in \textit{The Departed}, and Dexter Morgan and Dr. Gregory House in the television series \textit{Dexter} and \textit{House} respectively.} Bauer himself has inserted a few new lines into his routine: in the most current season of \textit{24}, he acknowledges that the American public has a right know about what is done in its name, and the television program has incorporated fresh opinions into the political milieu of Jack’s world—including a president averse to torture. Unlike the Bush administration, Bauer has acknowledged his dirty hands, stating: “I am more than willing to be judged by the people you claim to represent. I will let them decide the price I must pay.” (Finn). (Similar to the administration, however, Bauer does not regret his decisions, because he believes he has always acted out of necessity.\footnote{Saying, “do not sit there with that smug look on your face and expect me to regret the decisions I have made because, sir, the truth is, I don’t” (Finn).})

Of course, the nation’s increased tendency toward criticism of the Bush administration may have more to do with disillusionment with conservatism, weariness with the War on Terror and state secrecy, and frustration with accumulation of debts and economic setbacks, than with conscious rejection of the state of exception and embrace of civic engagement. For to a large extent, President Obama’s campaign of hope and change was greeted with such popular support because it responded to the disillusionment and weariness of the masses. The degree to which an attitude of critical awareness is applied to the actions of our new Democratic administration will be telling.

President Obama made symbolic return to the United States’ liberal humanist roots an early priority. In an unmistakable repudiation of the post-9/11 state of exception’s policies of domestic eavesdropping and torture, he called in his inaugural address for a return to American ideals:

\begin{quote}
\textit{[W]e reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our founding fathers faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, crafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.}\footnote{Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address,” Inaugural address, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2009.}
\end{quote}

Then, on his first and second days in office, the President signed executive orders calling for state transparency, for the closing of Guantanamo Bay prison, for a moratorium on war crimes trials, and for the definitive prohibition of torture. Now that he has set a tone for transparency and underscored the importance of the rule of law,\footnote{He has done so in the form of many of his executive orders, as well as in public remarks to the press and a joint session of Congress.} and many of the principal enthusiasts of both torture and the state of exception are no longer in office, how easy it would be to let the messiness of the past eight years drop into Lethe and move on. The Obama administration itself seems inclined toward this notion of forgetting: exhorting us to move forward or focus on the task at hand, disavowing intentions to investigate or pursue the Bush administration’s legal infractions.

The administration thus stands in opposition to torture, but cautiously—claiming a change in policy and return to rule of law without drastically endangering its political capital by
spearheading awkward or uncomfortable investigations. It has rejected the possibility of torture use on its own watch and avowed the definitions of torture promulgated by international law, but also rejected concentrating on prosecution of past wrongs.\textsuperscript{151} Leading such probes would not only require expending considerable time, energy, and political capital, but would also alienate the intelligence community—something disagreeable to a President who unequivocally needs the community’s support, and has already contentiously appointed the outsider Leon Panetta to lead it.\textsuperscript{152} Naturally, the CIA is not welcoming of a close inquiry into its activities, which would compromise agents who used torture when it was sanctioned as standard operating procedure; the justification that many who used torture were obeying orders or acting in the perceived line of duty makes the proposition of prosecution thorny. Moreover, while several of the President’s cabinet members could yet promote an official probe spearheaded by the Justice Department, the department too is susceptible to uncomfortable outcomes from intra-office prosecution that would compromise its own.\textsuperscript{153} Congressional inquiry into the Bush administration’s power abuses and sanction of torture seem the most likely possibility for a state-lead probe. Encouragingly, two Congressional committees regarding post-9/11 legal infractions have recently been proposed, and several members of Congress have expressed strong intention to promote public disclosure of the United States’ torture policy (Benjamin). Nonetheless, in order for such initiatives to gain traction or be exposed to the public, they will need bi-partisan and public support; it should not be forgotten that with a probe into the torture sanction several members of Congress risk potentially damaging public disclosure of their ties to collusion with U.S. torture policy.

Considering these political obstacles impeding a publicly exposed investigation into torture’s role in the War on Terror, demonstrable public support is necessary; in order for a political body to expend the political capital necessary to appointment a commission or special prosecutor, they will need to know it is welcomed by the public. A public clamoring for at least investigative probes, even if the probes do not result in prosecution, would serve as an official and historically symbolic rejection of the Bush administration’s state of exception policies and its departure from office without so much as a remorseful word.\textsuperscript{154} Not only would an investigation lead to further declassification of the secret documents inhibiting full judgment of the administration’s activities, it would also serve to dissuade future recourse to such extralegal conduct. As the nation moves back toward its tradition of liberal democracy, we must not forget the importance to that framework of civic engagement.


\textsuperscript{152} Mark Mazzetti, “Panetta Open to Tougher Methods in Some C.I.A. Interrogation,” The New York Times, February 5, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/06/us/politics/06cia.html?scp =a46&page=panetta&sec=csc. Panetta, though he has publicly labeled water-boarding as torture, stated in his confirmation hearing that he would not prosecute agency operatives who had utilized interrogation methods—even those as torture as water-boarding—that were previously authorized by the Justice Department.


V. Mutual Culpability. Or, Toward a Conclusion.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to make explicit that the American people's complicitous accountability is not wholly contained within the political arena. Rather, our consumer preferences and choices, the ways we read, write, and talk about human rights, torture, or the rule of law, all contribute to the normative context in which we live—and therefore have an unforeseeable effect on how political officials act, cultural producers represent, and average citizens behave. While our attitudes and choices, actions or lack thereof, influence political actors' perceptions of how they can behave, so our decisions as consumers reflect a need for cultural forms to satisfy wishes, desires, and fears, that is carefully considered by cultural producers. Our cultural production and consumption, as Joseph Slaughter noticed, have "implications not only for the imagination but the legislation of an international human rights community; they partly determine the discursive parameters within which and imaginative patterns with which a human rights international might be realized" (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 328).

Moreover, participation in our cultural milieu renders us cultural actors who make demands for "generic conformity [in representations] that influence the terms and conventions in which the world can be imagined and the observation and enjoyment of human rights realized" (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 326). Just as international legal conventions are dependent on domestic institutions to uphold their precepts, since they themselves lack proper enforcement mechanisms, international legal conventions and human rights principles are also dependent on civic espousal of their ideals and cultural representation of their precepts in order to become reified and expressed by social convention (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 44). As beneficiaries and "image brokers of an international imaginary," we are complicitous in creating a normative context that spreads around the world attitudes and ideals we have reflected or desired—thereby broadcasting those attitudes and ideals exclusive of the extent to which they are politically enforced (Slaughter, Human Rights Inc. 327).

Attention to representations of issues like torture is thus imperative. For we must recognize the extent to which the mediums by which we encounter human rights issues inform our attitudes and perceptions, promote distance between viewers and issues, and establish or reinforce distorted perceptions; simultaneously, we must be cognizant of our culture's appropriation of the fictions within these mediums as pseudo-realities with the capacity to intervene on actual events. Above all, we must remember that the voices of victims—be they victims of torture or other human rights violations—are largely excluded from this process. It is not the words of victims, but those that we as cultural producers ventriloquize, that sound in our culture and our cultural forms.
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