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Ideology of the Photographs: Thinking with Sontag and Butler

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This paper discusses the role of photography and frame as evidence and their limitations, keeping in mind Butler's argument regarding the visual modes of regulation of reality. The ways in which various literary and visual modes of representation portray reality are more often than not controlled by the state in certain ways. This paper explores the relationship between photographs, its regulation by the political and military authorities and ethical responsiveness of viewers by invoking the idea of face propounded by Levinas.

When I considered at first to discuss the role of photography and frame as evidence, keeping in mind Butler's argument regarding the visual modes of regulation of reality, the first problem that came up before me was: would it be something futile and an imposition of meaning on something which is by nature to be seen? But Butler's claim regarding the way suffering is presented to us through the framing of reality in a certain way – for example, "embedded reporting" and our ethical response to it – prompted me to address certain questions involving the frame and its role in establishing or not establishing legal, political and ethical responsibility.

Since the beginning of civilisation the question can art have the capacity to transform the world politically and morally has invariably haunted the philosophers and social scientists alike. This paper makes an attempt to address two different but interrelated questions in the light of photography by primarily focusing on Abu Ghraib pictures. First, I intend to look critically at Butler's claim that framing of reality in a certain way imposes constraints on what can be heard, seen and read during the times of war. And second, I propose to consider the various ways in which the relationship between photography and ethical responsiveness can be explored by invoking the idea of face propounded by Levinas in one of his interviews.

Butler in "Torture and the Ethics of Photography" is largely concerned with how our understanding of perceptible reality and our response to the suffering of others are controlled by military and governmental authorities, who by allowing "embedded reporting", that is, to allow the journalists and photographers to report only from the perspective of the government, try to regulate the visual field. This nature of photography, which works on the principle of inclusion and exclusion, was raised by Sontag in her book On Photography (1977). Arguing that the expression on the subject's face about poverty, suffering, dignity or exploitation support the photographer's perspectives, she writes:

In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are (Sontag 4).

Despite claiming that a photograph is a more authentic and innocent medium of reality than any other mimetic object, Sontag remarks that photographs are not the unmediated translation of reality into images. In other words, this tendency to provide us with a subjective reality in the name of objectivity is inherent in images. Although Butler agrees

that there is no way to perceive reality without selection, she explores the ways through which selection puts restraint on how we understand reality. For her, to understand the role of civilizational and cultural norms in framing the frame in a certain way, one has to see not only what the war photographs show but how it shows the reality. In other words, both form and content of the production of incidents are equally important for her. She advocates a critical role for visual culture so as to perceive the "forcible frame" (which can be explained as both form and content of the photograph), which is organized by the dehumanizing norm. But how can we expose this normative principle? What interests me is Butler's basic argument that our perspectives are being regulated by the governmental authorities. If we extend her argument a little further, we can say that photographs are pervaded by the dominant ideology. If the dominant ideology is seen as a strong presence in the photographs, one needs to resist it to get at a truer picture of reality the photographs pretend to present. I wish to begin with the supposition that the photographs, to a great extent, are like the texts with ideological gaps, silences, absences and cracks. To make my point more effectively regarding the Macherey-inspired reading of photographs, first I need to summarize Macherey's argument briefly regarding the ideological gaps in the literary texts.

In so doing, I'll make a meticulous attempt to take into account the specificities of his argument, as such sort of application of theory from one realm to another, remains under the constant risk of being fallacious and mechanical. For Macherey, a text becomes the vehicle for ideology not so much by what it says as by what it does not say. It is in the silences and gaps that the presence of ideology can be felt. Because of these gaps and absences a text can never be a coherent whole but always remains incomplete. The work is always de-centred and displays contradiction and conflict in meaning. Since it is in the nature of the text to remain incomplete, the task of the critic is not to fill in the gaps but to find the basic principle of these gaps and explore its relation to ideology. In this new light the word regulation (both literary and visual) becomes a bit problematic. Is it possible to regulate somebody's perspective completely? In order to expose a photograph's ideology and explore these gaps, it becomes more important to focus on paradoxically what the photographs repress rather than express.

The key words in Macherey's analysis are gaps and contradictions. For me, those gaps are important which do not allow the photographers or authors to regulate the meaning completely. To consider the issue of gap in these images, one will have to address the basic questions of the intention and purpose behind clicking these pictures. Initially these pictures were taken for private circulation in order to break the monotony of soldier's life. Of course, it does not mean that the issues of civilizational, religious and racial conflicts are secondary to understand the operation of ideology in these photographs. These points I will discuss at length in the latter part of my paper. Those interrogators did not seem to be aware of the fact that once the boundary between the public and the private will be debunked (as it happened by the dissemination of these images through internet), the photographs can be used as evidence against them. So there was a clear disconnect between the photographs as a means of private entertainment and a source of legal evidence. This disjunction stems from the nature of the photographs, as their authors/photographers are never in full control of their meaning.

Butler in her analysis of Abu Ghraib photographs views these images as an example of "embedded reporting", as these pictures were involved in underscoring the perspective of the war and validated a point of view. What is at issue here becomes even more compelling when we realise that these war crimes were an enactment of the same civilizational and cultural conflicts that underpinned the very idea of war. In the light of the ideological gaps of

the images two issues are at stake here. First, we have to look at the limitation of frame in fixing a political and legal responsibility by taking into account the question of what has been left out by the frame, in other words, what are those realities that are being repressed by the frame? Where are those authorities who ordered to orchestrate such forms of interrogation? Are they inside the frame or beyond its reach? The second issue involves the US soldiers' deliberate attempt to decimate the Islamic ideals by stripping those detainees naked and exploit the Islamic taboos against sex and masturbation in order to bring sexual shame to them. How did these soldiers place themselves as spectators vis a vis the detainees? Will their behaviour help us define "Americanness". It should be made clear here that this definition of Americanness based on the behaviour of a few soldiers does not involve the element of generalisation but the issue of representation since these soldiers were the representative of the official American policy on war.

Eroll Morris's film *Standard Operating Procedure* comes up with a shocking revelation that no one above the rank of staff sergeant served any form of sentence for the abuses at Abu Ghraib. The film documents the limitations of the photographs as an evidence of war crime, particularly for those who were not present at the scene, for example, someone like General Miller, the mastermind behind the interrogation of the so-called higher value security detainees, who briefed the interrogators and told them, "You have to treat the prisoners like dogs. They have to know that you are in full control", as pointed out by Janis Karpinsky, brigadier general of military police in Iraq.

The question that has been haunting the critics and media persons alike is: why these photographs were taken in a place where photography was prohibited in the first place? Were those soldiers and interrogators even aware what they were doing did not constitute the cases of abuse but came under the technical terms torture and war crime. Did they behave in such a manner for the sake of amusement or documentation? Most of these interrogators in the interview with Erroll Morris admitted that despite being aware of the fact that most of the detainees were not the terrorists, not of military intelligence value at all, but petty criminals like drivers, bakers who had allegedly raped someone or were engaged in the street fights, they actively participated in the acts of torture at the behest of "They"- those higher authorities who do not exist inside the frame. The infamous picture of Lynndie England with a leash around the neck of a prisoner named Gus substantiates this claim since Gus was a regular prisoner, who was there on the charges of drinking and beating somebody up. "We just did what we were told, to soften them up for interrogation", said England. Another specialist of military police Sabrina Harman tried to rationalize her behaviour and stated that "I took more pictures to record what is going on. Not many people know this shit goes on. The only reason I want to be there is to get the pictures to prove that the US is not what they think." Ironically, unlike those higher authorities, she was not lucky enough to go unpunished.

One can say, then, that the question becomes important how these interrogators placed themselves as spectators in relation to the detainees, after Abu Ghraib became exactly what General Miller wanted it to become— the "new interrogation centre of Iraq." It seems that by stripping them naked and making a human pyramid out of them and by employing female interrogators they deliberately and strategically exploited the subservient position of women in traditional Islamic society. In some of these pictures, we find some female officers posing cheerfully before the masturbating prisoner, whose head has been covered with underwear. Exploiting these Islamic taboos became a means for these soldiers to establish their racial and civilizational superiority over these detainees in order to distinguish between human and non-human categories. Javal Davis, sergeant Military Police remarks how sexual shame was

brought upon them in order to break them up. One of them was stripped naked and kept in a dark room, with women's panties on his head. Suddenly an officer switched on the lights, and the prisoner cried: "Oh, my God, Allah", and then lights were switched off. It is self-evident in these photographs that the interrogators never felt this element of shame; instead it became a form of pornography, a source of entertainment for them, a point that has been discussed by Butler at length. This state of shamelessness can only be compared to the brazenness of the Nazi soldiers in the camp, who executed the extreme forms of torture and reduced many innocent Jewish people into Muselmann like figures. In the chapter called "Shame, or on the Subject", referring to Primo Levi's account of the liberation of the Jewish people at the hand of the Russian soldiers, Agamben demonstrates how shame became the dominant sentiment of the survivors of the Camp. Levi describes that the advent of the first Russian advance guard at the noon of January27, 1945 at the Camp of Auschwitz, which ensured the freedom of the prisoners, was not celebrated with the joy but under shame. The four young Russian soldiers exchanged a few timid words and threw embarrassed glances at the sprawling bodies. They neither greeted them nor smiled at them; their lips were sealed not out of compassion but out of shame. He writes:

It was the shame which we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame that the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime, at the fact that such a crime should exist...

Levi's argument reflects upon the ethical point that only a just man can feel the sense of shame or guilt at other's crime. Russian soldiers felt the compassion, confusion, and shame in greeting the half dead prisoners whereas German soldiers relished in their indiscriminate slaughter. Abu Ghraib pictures are marked by the absence of any such feeling of shame. Rather, we find the triumphant and cheerful faces of the torturers in various playful postures. The implementation of the orders of their bosses brought the moments of pleasure for them. In this sense the conspicuous absence of shame in these photographs of torture are indicative of their identity, their inhuman behaviour; it puts them in the category of German soldiers. These images become the sites, where the racial and civilizational binaries that validate the dehumanizing norm and evoke the decimation of Islamic ideals are subverted. Gregor Jordan's 2010 movie Unthinkable, which is not about photography but torture, questions any fixing ¬of such binary and makes an attempt to capture the essence of Americanness by underscoring the extreme measures the interrogators can take while torturing a detainee. In the opening scene the videotape rolls: "My name is Yusuf Mohammad, my former name is Steven Arthur Younger, and I have planted three nuclear bombs across the country. They will detonate unless my demands are met." In the film Yusuf deliberately stages his arrest and undergoes extreme torture before he kills himself in order to secure the freedom of his kids, who were brought to the scene to be tortured. He was trying to make a point about the flimsy distinction between the human and non-human in the act of torture and about the moral character of the U.S., which is defined by extreme barbarism in the name of interrogation.

After raising the positioning of the interrogators as the spectators of the images I intend to move on the question how we as spectators are placed vis a vis the images? What do they say about our shame and dilemma? We want to look at those pictures, and we do not want to look at them at the same time. In order to conceive this issue, which involves the elements of shame and ethical responsiveness (as shame gives birth to responsibility), we will have to take into account the specificities of the changing nature of war and the description of war. "War photography is the new war poetry", says Alex Danchev. Unlike the world wars now war is not fought between two equally technologically and economically advanced

nations so as to avoid maximum destruction. Guerrilla war is in vogue. The ground realities and rhetoric used in war are different now therefore photography has to reinvent itself in order to be new war poetry. Danchev compares the classic war photographer's attempt to capture the whiteness of the face of both soldiers and victims with Owen's effort to comprehend the blank expression of the enemy soldier. This has been very effectively captured in a poem like "Strange Meeting", where Owen meets an enemy soldier in the hell after his death and finds an incomprehensible look on his face. Danchev writes:

The classic war photographers have all been portrait photographers in extremis. They sought the whites of the eye, and tried to fathom what they found there. The original war poets did something very similar. Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother of very strange look he had seen on the faces of soldiers at Etaples in 1917 (Danchev34).

Owen's letter is important to understand the nature of face captured by both the photographers and the war poets. He wrote:

I found an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England...It was not despair or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

Danchev is interested in this unencompassable nature of face, whose frailty, blankness and incomprehensible look demand some response from us. To have a better understanding of our ethical response to face in the photographs, the pre-eminent philosopher Immanuel Levinas's idea of face-as-demand is important. Levinas, in his new way to interpret face, calls it a fundamental event. The ideas of extreme frailty and demand are central to his discussion of face. Speaking of face in ethical terms he remarks:

It is an irreducible means of access, and it is in ethical terms that it can be spoken of. I have said that in my analysis of the face it is a demand; a demand, not a question. The face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something. It is going to ask you for something (Wright 169).

When asked by one of the interviewers if it was necessary to have the potential for language in order to be a face in the ethical sense, he responded: "I think the beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you." For him the face which is unencompassable by nature reveals the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

Butler in her book Frames of War takes up Sontag's claim that photographs are the partial imprint of reality because photographs in the absence of caption and written analysis cannot furnish us interpretation. Levinas's counterintuitive claim that - language does not begin with the signs or words that one gives but its origin lies in the fact of being addressed – counters Sontag's claim regarding photographs. The silence of the Abu Ghraib photographs draws our attention to the vulnerability and frailty of those faces. The argument that someone is so weak that he demands some response from us broadens our moral imagination. How do we tolerate and react against such atrocities as spectators, as someone who have some agency, some ethical and political responsibility. In this way, their endurance and dignity tell us not only about them but about us. Levinas's idea of ethics is not based on an empty rhetoric, as in his book Totality and Infinity he associates justice with ethics, and the latter always presupposes politics. The dead do not say much but the commandment – "Though shalt not kill" inscribed on the faces of these photographs – demand our ethical response, our active participation in preventing such atrocities. In the endless war on terror, counter-

insurgency operations, and th forceful occupation of the remote territories, torture has become a norm and the truth is being regulated by forcing the perspective of war on the frame. Under such circumstances we have a far more critical and decisive role to play in order to expose the normative principle. Perhaps it was in this sense that Sontag remarked: "Let the atrocious images haunt us...The images say: this is what human beings are capable of doing."

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