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A New View of Abu Ghraib

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A book and film go beyond the photos

Of the myriad questions raised by the photographs from Abu Ghraib — Who took them? How did they circulate? Who was responsible? — the question of what they show never seemed to be at issue. They showed the torture of Iraqi detainees by American forces, didn't they?

The answer is more complicated, as Errol Morris reveals in Standard Operating Procedure, his new documentary about the images, and as he and Philip Gourevitch explain in the new book of the same name, published by Penguin Press.

Morris is an accomplished filmmaker who won the Academy Award for The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara (2003). One of his films, The Thin Blue Line (1988), used re-enactments to tell the story of a murder and its aftermath and, in so doing, pushed the boundaries of documentary form. Similarly, Standard Operating Procedure contains re-enactments and imagined scenes of events at Abu Ghraib: ghostly interrogators, barking dogs, swarming ants, dangling nooses.

The scenes, often shot in super-slow motion, are so beautifully crafted that they have an effect opposite from the terror Morris may have intended. Rather, I found myself watching them as artistic set pieces. By comparison the still photos taken by prison guards hold our gaze and retain the power to shock. Morris has interviewed many of the soldiers involved in the events depicted in the photographs from Abu Ghraib, and it is their story that he tells.

The film includes on-camera interviews with the prison's commander, Janis Karpinski, who was demoted from brigadier general to colonel as a result of the investigation into prisoner abuse; Pfc. Lynndie England, seen in several photographs giving the thumbs up and in one holding a leather strap attached to a detainee's neck; Specialist Sabrina Harman, one of several soldiers who took pictures at the prison; and Sgt. Javal Davis, Specialist Megan Ambuhl, and Specialist Jeremy Sivits, all of whom either

appeared in or took photographs. Morris also interviewed Tim Dugan, a civilian interrogator who opens the film by announcing that Abu Ghraib "was Charlie Foxtrot without a doubt" — a hopeless, miserable, anarchic mess.

Morris threads two explanations for what happened at Abu Ghraib through the film, and they are not mutually exclusive. One focuses on individual acts of evil. It revolves around Specialist Charles Graner Jr., who received a sentence of 10 years for his actions, and who choreographed many of the scenes captured in photographs. England fell in love with Graner and did what she was told. But it was Graner who organized the pyramid of naked bodies, the men with hooded heads looking downward, and who appeared in a photograph to punch prisoners. And it was Graner as well who kept insisting that photographs be taken.

Harman thought, at first, that Graner wanted the pictures as a record showing that the military police were following procedure for softening up prisoners, but over time she came to suspect that the images provided evidence of wrongdoing. She was particularly upset by an incident in which a prisoner was poked in the privates, which she saw as a form of sexual molestation. Harman wrote home, "I took more pictures now to 'record' what was going on."

The Army wanted to blame it all on a few rogue soldiers. Since military authorities did not allow Morris to interview Graner, it is impossible to know his side of the story. It is clear from the comments of others in the film that his is a borderline personality, a magnetic figure who got England pregnant and then abandoned her for Ambuhl, to whom he is now married. Graner may be villainous, but he is not the story. The second — and broader — narrative that Morris plays out is what was happening in Iraq, how the war against terror became a war that permitted torture.

From the highest levels of government to the interrogators to the military police at Abu Ghraib, who themselves lived more like prisoners than guards, the message was clear: To extract information, use any means necessary short of death. The Geneva Convention did not apply to "security detainees," as we've since learned from Justice Department memos made public, so new rules allowed for various methods to break prisoner resistance during interrogation: manipulations of food, clothing, shelter, lighting, heating, even sound. Davis reports blasting hip-hop so detainees couldn't sleep, but they started singing it. Then he switched to heavy metal, but they adjusted to the pounding A chord. Finally he put on country music. "That worked, they couldn't stand it," he tells Morris.

At the screening I attended, we all laughed. Then we stopped short, wondering whether Morris had trapped us into seeing how easy it is to find humor in suffering. The military police made the detainees wear underwear on their heads, balance themselves on boxes, and crawl naked across wet cement. It was all standard operating procedure, that and far worse never recorded on camera.

So what do the photographs show? The image that became an international icon, the caped-and-hooded detainee standing martyrlike with the electrical wire attached to his fingers, depicts an accepted armed-forces technique for breaking a prisoner's spirit. The wires are not connected, the filmmaker explains, and the detainee, named Gilligan by the MP's, later became a favorite prisoner who often received an extra meal or cigarette. And the photograph of England holding the leashed naked man has been misunderstood. She is not pulling the prisoner at all (there is slack in the strap); Graner had used it as a harness to get a resistant detainee out of his cell. He then asked England to pose. "I was convicted of being in a picture," says England, "but that's all I did." While other photographs capture criminal acts, those two shown so widely around the world do not: They capture standard operating procedure.

Morris's film ends by suggesting that Graner and the others who were convicted served as scapegoats: No one above the rank of staff sergeant received prison time. Because the film relies so heavily on soldiers' testimony (for which some of them were paid), and because Morris's visual style is so compelling (framing the talking heads tightly and having them speak directly to the viewer), it is too easy to lose track of the larger story about how the photographs must be understood in context.

Fortunately we also have the book by Gourevitch — editor of The Paris Review and author of a work on the Rwandan genocide, We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) — and Morris.

The book opens with an epigraph from William Carlos Williams: "That which is possible is inevitable." Gourevitch and Morris divide their volume into three parts: "Before," "During," and "After." "Before" narrates the story of the transformation of Abu Ghraib from the most notorious of Saddam's prisons (100 inmates a week were executed) into an American military penal facility. It is a story of chaos and confusion and the process by which Washington "established that the humane treatment of prisoners in the war on terror was optional." "After" briefly describes the prosecution and

conviction of those soldiers held responsible for criminal action, many of whom would receive prison terms.

"During" is the bulk of the book, and here Gourevitch and Morris use extensive interviews with the dramatis personae to tell the story of how the pictures came to be taken and what the actors thought they were doing. What is made clearer here than in the film is the "siege mentality" endured by the military police. Mortars regularly bombarded the prison, living conditions were atrocious, and interrogators gave the orders on how to deal with prisoners. The message, Ambuhl says, was: "Don't turn your back on anybody, because they are all possible terrorists, even the children. ... They couldn't say we broke the rules because there were no rules."

Gourevitch and Morris also provide a direct meditation on the photographs that the film lacks: "Photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation. Looked at in this way, as evidence of something beyond itself, a photograph can best be understood not as an answer, or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions."

The book does not include the photographs. It was a bold decision to leave them out, and it is the right one. Looking yet again at the images, which most readers would probably read as self-evident depictions of abuse, would distract from the story that is about much more than the pictures. "The photographs have a place in the story," Gourevitch and Morris explain in the notes, "but they are not the story, and it would be untruthful here to submit once again to their frame."

And so we are presented in the book with a more complete narrative of such images as the mock electrocution of Gilligan, who was suspected in the killing of an American agent. Graner was ordered to "make his life a living hell for the next three days and find out his name." Graner, Davis, and others proceeded to "stress out" the prisoner. It was cold, and they took some pity by cutting a hole in a blanket and draping it over him. After more screaming ("more or less repeating the first half of Full Metal Jacket, loud as you could to him"), they put him on the box and attached the wires. He stood there 10, maybe 15 minutes. "No physical harm was ever done to him," Harman declares. "He was laughing at us toward the end of the night, maybe because he knew we couldn't break him."

Details such as those in the book provide for an even more nuanced and jarring story than is shown in the film. It is noteworthy that the pictureless book reveals more than the wordy movie does. Images attract, but they do not self-explain. For that we need narrative

prose. A picture, it turns out, is not a substitute for a thousand words, but an artifact in need of them.n

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