

## Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship: The News and the ‘War of Images’

Dr. John Huxford  
Villanova University

---

Visual images have long been employed as propaganda. However, new technology and a new emphasis on the visual have elevated this usage. Today the image is as much a weapon as a bullet or a bomb, with news serving as an effective delivery system. In a world of instant media, the signifier has become perhaps even more potent an instrument of war than the acts it signifies. In this context I examine the relationship between photographs and journalism and discuss a series of powerful signifiers, from 911 to grisly images now coming from the campaign in Iraq. The paper explores a typology of functions and epistemological positions that the newsphoto fulfills: *surveillance*, *witnessing* and *spectatorship*. These categories are crucial, I argue, to understanding the way photographs are legitimated in the news, with these functions played off against one another, not only by journalists but by those intent on terror.

---

**R**ELECTING on the stream of images emanating from the conflict in Iraq, journalist Christopher Dickey wrote:

The Iraqi horror picture show has become too grim, too bloody, too deeply sinister for most of us to endure....Even a glimpse of these images stirs something monstrous in our collective unconscious, a lingering nightmare of fear and anger, despair and guilt. But in the course of two weeks they've become pervasive and invasive. They're everywhere you look, until you just can't look anymore. And still the images keep coming. (*Newsweek Online*: 5/12/04)

The world has taken, in W.J.T Mitchell's phrase, a "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, 1994), a move anticipated since at least the beginning of the last century (see Simmel, 1908/1950). It is not surprising, then, that terrorism and military conflict, and the news coverage of such conflict, have taken similar turns. From the collapse of the twin towers to stories of Iraqi prisoner abuse and terrorist executions, our newspapers, television screens and computer monitors have been filled with images of the horrific and the grotesque.

Following Baudrillard (1995), a number of scholars have applied concepts of post modernity to recent military and terrorist actions (see Kellner, 1999; Gray, 2003; Hammond, 2004). In large part, this appeal to postmodernism is motivated by the notion that modern warfare has become meaningless simulacra, dominated by dramatic images that evoke the thrill of Hollywood special effects, while the deluge of information and images produce not a representation of the reality of war, but a media spectacle in which it is impossible to distinguish the virtual from the actual.

Provocative and insightful though these critiques are, a rather different approach to these issues may prove fruitful. For it is not so much that war has become in Hammond's

terms “a mere image,” but rather that images have become, increasingly, a form of war – both as sophisticated psychological weapons and as fiercely contested battlefields of meaning.

Visual images have long been used as propaganda (see Jaubert, 1989; Page, 1996). But new technology, new techniques and a new emphasis on the visual have elevated this usage. Today the image is as much a weapon as a bullet or a bomb, with news coverage serving as a frighteningly effective delivery system. In a world of relentless images and instant media, the signifier has become even more potent an instrument of war than the acts it signifies, making the question of how to respond to this visual assault one of the most pressing issues of media ecology that we currently face.

In this context, this paper examines the complex relationship between photographs and journalism and discusses the significance of a series of powerful signifiers that have been created and deployed in the recent hostilities, from 9/11 and its symbols of mass destruction to grisly images now coming from the campaign in Iraq. The paper offers and explores a typology of functions and epistemological positions that the newsphoto may be said to fulfill – *surveillance*, the role of *witnessing*, and the act of *spectatorship*. These overlapping yet conceptually distinct categories are crucial, I argue, to understanding the way photographs are situated and legitimated in the news with these functions frequently played off against one another, not only by journalists but also by those intent on spreading terror.

### News and Images

**I**NCREASINGLY, the image looms large in times of conflict and crisis, as advancing technology has given journalism the ability to cover events in real time and in ever-more graphic detail. The crucial role played by photography in response to the events of September 11, 2001 has been widely acknowledged, news pictures “rising to fill the space of chaos and confusion that journalism was expected to render orderly” (Zelizer, 2002, p. 48), with images representing the dynamic heart of coverage that day. In the words of one news editor: “the pictures meant everything” (Wenner, 2001, p. 32). Similarly, war images broadcast live from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq were said to herald a new relationship between the media and the war it covered, the news media “further becoming an essential condition for structuring our perception of the world... and unavoidably involved with this horizon of perception itself.” (International Communication Symposium, 2002, reported in *Communication Research Trends*, 2003).

It seems ironic today that the emergence of photojournalism in the late 1800s was at first resisted fiercely -- not only by social critics but by many journalists -- and continued to be contended for decades (see Barnhurst, 1994; Zelizer, 1995). The acceptance and employment of the news image has been a long and complex process, its use resting not only on the exigencies of news-making but on concepts of the visual that date to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In this paper, I shall argue that biological imperatives, journalistic practice, emerging technology and traditional attitudes to the image have entwined to shape a series of epistemological positions that mark the function and role of the news photograph in the modern news media. In the following sections

I draw together and examine a typology of these positions and functions, including *Surveillance*, varying modes of *Witnessing* and *Spectatorship*.

## Surveillance

**T**HIS category indicates the information role of the news media (see Lasswell, 1948; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; Wright, 1964, 1986; Anderson & Meyer 1975), a function that helps to provide the wide range of knowledge that a citizen needs to live and work in modern society, while simultaneously positioning journalism as a watchdog monitoring the activities of government and other authorities. For this most basic function of the journalistic enterprise, the photographic image was embraced as a process that visually supported the veracity of information supplied through text. As Zelizer argues:

Those journalists who did recognize photography played primarily to its referential or denotative qualities and ability to reference reality. If photography were to be a part of news, these journalists reasoned, it should offer a visual expansion of journalistic practice that could extend the adage "the camera does not lie" to the larger journalistic community (1995, p. 8).

This positioning relied heavily on the touchstone of indexicality, the concept that a signifier has a more direct grounding in literal "truth" when it has a physical connection to the object or event to which it refers (see Peirce, 1991, for a discussion of indexical signs). Photographs represent such a "physical connection" in that they are produced by light rays reflected from the external world and recorded physically on film, and thus, in terms of veracity, transcend the subjective vagaries of the word.

The linkage of the photographic image with objective knowledge that goes beyond subjectivity is roundly refuted by media scholars, who have pointed to the use of photographs in news as an act of *individual construction* (including, for example choice of subject and angle of shot) that reflects ideological values and brings a plethora of connotative implications outside of denotational meaning (Berger, 1972; Hall, 1973; Sontag, 1973; Barthes, 1977; Hartley, 1982). Yet even in this age of digital manipulation, the belief that the "camera cannot lie" has proved surprisingly robust.

In large part, the endurance of the myth of photographic truth may be ascribed to the depth of its roots in Western thought. Almost from the outset, photography was regarded as not only an achievement of enhanced mimetic fidelity, capturing a likeness in extraordinary detail, but a process that appeared to meet the rationalistic criteria for objectivity. This belief reflected views of the mimetic and the power of the visual that dates to the Renaissance. In the words of Larry Gross:

The ambition to achieve truly representational, mimetic visual art has been inextricably entwined with the notions of absolute knowledge and objective truth. The pattern was most explicit in the Italian Renaissance, and personified most clearly by Leonardo da Vinci, the consummate artist-scientist. For Leonardo, science and painting were valued in so far as they aided man's grasp and revelation of the empirical truth of nature. (1974, p. 54)

If Renaissance art represented a move towards realism and, in this philosophy, an ability to capture truth, then the photographic process appeared to be the triumph of that

approach, removing the inevitably flawed subjectivity of the artist. Photography seemed to offer "unmediated truth," a kind of "automatic writing" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 17) that went far beyond artist's impressions. This potential was perhaps most graphically illustrated by Eadweard Muybridge, whose high-speed photography of horses in motion in 1882 proved that the "flying gallop" so often depicted by artists -- with the animal's legs stretched out fully at both front and rear -- simply did not happen.

The photographic process, then, represented in the words of André Bazin, "an image of the world formed automatically without the creative intervention of man" (Stephens, 1998, p. 57). This notion of the eradication of the human agent is, as William Mitchell (1992) points out, part of the drive towards scientific empiricism that lies behind many standard scientific procedures; random sampling, to take one example. It is unsurprising, then, that the news media of the nineteenth century came to base its growing desire for a mantle of journalistic objectivity around the photographic process, both in terms of practice and of metaphor.<sup>1</sup> By mid-century, there was a widespread typification of the newspaper as a camera's eye on the social and natural world, with the *New York Herald*, for example, declaring itself in 1848 "the daily daguerreotype of the heart and soul of the model republic" (Schiller, 1977, p. 92).

While the photographic has come to represent a path to reliable information as part of news surveillance, the most significant aspect of such surveillance, from the standpoint of this paper, is the way scanning the environment for potential threats taps our instincts for survival. From this perspective, humans are hard-wired for news, with the journalist adopting the role of sentinel for society in much the same way that animal "sentinels" protect their herds, standing apart and warning of danger (see Lasswell, 1948; Shoemaker, 1996). In the words of Shoemaker:

Although news is a manufactured product, subject to a wide variety of influences, the basic form that news content takes is also at its root determined by the...innate human drive to know whether threats exist in the environment (1996, p. 33).

Given this, it is perhaps inevitable that times of crisis increase the need for the information flow that the news offers (Weick, 1988; McLeod, Perse, Signorielli, & Courtright, 1993; Perse and Signorielli et al, 2002). The national crisis of 9/11, for example, took news consumption to astonishing new levels (White, 2001), with people reporting to have viewed an average of just over eight hours of television news coverage on the day of the attacks (Schuster et al., 2001). In such times of crisis, especially, the ability of photograph to convey danger quickly and graphically makes it a prime component in the news' surveillance function, as does its ability to engender belief. As Zelizer comments on 9/11 coverage: "Photographs in the popular press helped register -- and counter -- the disbelief in which people the world over found themselves lodged" (2002, p. 48). Or as Debatin argues:

The sheer magnitude of the events was incomprehensible. There were no words and no signifiers that would have been adequate to describe the events. Whereas postmodern media philosophy is concerned with the flood of signifiers without signifieds, these events showed the power of the reverse situation: signifieds for which there were no signifiers.

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

Therefore, most TV networks restricted their immediate coverage to a repetition of the images (2002, p. 166).

In each of the categories explored in this paper, the focus and positions of three fundamental elements of mediated visual communication – content of image, source/channel, and observer – are key. In surveillance, the content concentrates on information pertaining to the health and welfare, directly or indirectly, of the self, while the validity of the communication process rests on the observer adopting a position of trust or belief to the source. When surveillance deals directly with acute levels of danger, the most direct emotional reaction is likely to be nervousness or fear.

### **Witnessing**

**W**ITNESSING, at its most basic, constitutes “a specific form of collective remembering that interprets an event as significant and one deserving of critical attention” (Zelizer, 1998, p. 10). In terms of news coverage, it offers the photographic illusion that the image carries the reader /viewer to the scene of the event being covered.

I have already suggested that the drive for mimetic truth based upon rationalistic criteria came to be embodied in the photographic process, a bias that may be traced to the emergence of artistic realism. However, a second element birthed in the cauldron of the Renaissance was to have, perhaps, an even more fundamental impact on Western thought. The Renaissance saw the beginning of an epistemological sea-change that placed the individual at the center of the social structure as the prime unit of importance (cf. Cassirer, 1954). It was a trend that would grow through an interlacing of radical theology, giving rise to Lutheranism and Calvinism; and in philosophy, most centrally, the Scottish Common Sense Realism of the late eighteenth century.

From the Renaissance onwards, the demand was not only for art that could reflect with mimetic fidelity the truth of nature, but also that this truth might be, in principle, unmediated. It is this latter concern that Gombrich (1982) addresses when he suggests that part of the motivation for the shift in artistic representation in the Renaissance came with a change in what was perceived as a plausible narration of sacred events. The move

was away from the pictographic method in which the sacred event was recounted in clear and simple hieroglyphs designed to make its audience *understand*, towards a style that left the impression they were *seeing the event for themselves*:

The rise of naturalism presupposes a shift in the beholder's expectations and demands. The public asks the artist to present the sacred event on an imaginary stage as it might have looked to *an eye-witness*...The invention of perspective brought closer the evocation of a familiar reality that allowed more easily for the faithful to contemplate the re-enactment of the story and identify the participants (*italics added*) (Gombrich, 1982, p. 29).

It was within this paradigm of “eyewitness” that the photograph, as a “fragment of nature,” came to be utilized as both a re-enactment and a source of evidence of the way

the natural world -- and its social equivalent -- operated. It is a perspective that has become central to television journalism, especially, a priority tacitly acknowledged in TV show titles such as CBS's *Eyewitness News*.

The notion of witnessing, then, is central to news coverage. Yet its significance is further elevated when what is being viewed carries a sense of being history-in-the-making, and that the viewer is seeing events that will be passed to future generations. Indeed, this is a motivation for extended coverage to which journalists frequently appeal when dealing with stories that transcend the routine.

Oddly perhaps, almost all scholarly attention paid to "witnessing" has linked this with scenes of atrocity; the definitive example being images from the Holocaust. To a degree this perspective, most often operating under the rubric of "bearing witness," draws its importance from the notion that witnessing may be part of a healing process for those engaged in the viewing, even when that viewing is mediated (see Zelizer, 1998, 2002). However, while this may be an important aspect, it seems clear that witnessing can also embrace more positive moments of history recorded in the news -- from the celebrations of V.E. Day in 1945 to Armstrong stepping onto the lunar surface in 1969 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

In contrast to surveillance, witnessing shifts the focus from the veracity of content (important though this remains), to the act of viewing. At the same time, that content becomes more distant to the person doing the viewing, with its significance pertaining not so much to the self, but to history, posterity, or future generations.

If I may call this, at its most acute, *ritual* witnessing, in that it often performs the ritual work of collective memory and the building of communal unity, then a variation deals with what I would term the *judicial* mode of witnessing. In this, the news image functions indexically as visual evidence, with the act of "being a witness" meaning much the same as it does in the courtroom.

In the judicial mode, the act of witnessing is typically performed by the camera itself, producing testimony that will later be judged in legal proceedings (or perhaps, more informally, by the community or society), with the significance of the act pertaining not to the self or posterity but the good of society at large. While ritual witnessing may evoke grief or pride and an overriding "sense of occasion" (depending on the subject matter), the most common emotions stirred by judicial witnessing are likely to be anger or outrage at the crimes depicted.

### Live Coverage

**T**HE notion of being a witness to events that allow the individual to "see for themselves" has been given new prominence by the rise of live news coverage. Broadcast technology has made it increasingly easy to provide such "real time" reportage, and reporting live has become an increasingly dominant value in journalistic practice. Live coverage raises audience ratings and adds to viewer perceptions that a station is "on top of the news" (Tuggle and Huffman, 1999, 2001), even though it has been argued that the trend has a number of drawbacks, including giving the story greater importance than warranted (Morris and Nydahl, 1983), is often intrusive (Wittstock, 1991) and makes it difficult for journalists to both gather information and to assimilate it into a coherent reporting (Dunsmore, 1996; Seib, 1997).

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

All images conflate the distance of time and space between the thing represented and its observer, the indexicality of the photographic process creating the illusion of freezing both the moment and site of a news event for the viewer to “enter”. Since live coverage needs to sustain that illusion only along the spatial axis – as such coverage represents a genuine correspondence between event time and viewing time<sup>2</sup> – that sense of conflation is increased considerably. In Picard’s words:

Through (live) coverage, especially television coverage, the audience is psychologically drawn into the ongoing event and becomes a part of it through the ability to observe it from a perspective similar to actually being at the location (1993: 93).

While journalists are quick to acknowledge, implicitly, the surveillance and witnessing functions of their coverage, the news media is more loathe to admit that live reporting also increases journalism’s ability to allow its audience to engage in spectatorship. This latter function may substitute stimulation for edification and have adverse cognitive and psychological effects on viewers, even as it boosts ratings.

### **Spectatorship**

**I**N this perspective, the focus shifts still further towards the reactions of the beholder, with the informational or evidential value of visual content being superseded by the demand that the image provides stimulation or sensation. Spectatorship invites the eyes of the voyeur, the curious gaze, or the fixed stare of an audience. At its most generic, spectatorship allows the news to garner ratings by fulfilling its audience’s need for “entertainment” and stimulation through compelling images that viewers find difficult to either ignore or forget (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). It is an aspect of news that is often criticized by media scholars for emphasizing dramatic events over less-visual explanations and processes (Bogart, 1980; Bennett, 1996).

The fact that the image offers sensual immediacy and elicits emotional responses unrivaled by text has long been recognized. Aquinas, for example, suggested that images can be used to “excite the emotions, which are more effectively aroused by things seen than by things heard” (1948 edition; cited Stephens, 1998, p. 62. See also Messaris, 1997 and Meyrowitz, 1986 for detailed discussion of a broad range of devices through which the iconic image may engage attention and elicit emotion.) In part, it was suspicion of this ability that drove early resistance to photojournalism, with visual images being regarded as a medium that “bypassed the reasoning mind” (Becker, 1992, p. 7).

The capacity of the media to arouse similar feelings to those that viewers would experience from an unmediated event has been studied in detail by Reeves and Nass who concluded that even the simplest media was “close enough to the real people, places and things they depict to activate rich social and natural responses” (Reeves & Nass, 1996, p. 7). When subjects viewed negative events in television news stories, the two researchers found that:

The supposed psychological distance that comes with media does not cause a fundamentally different reaction. Negativity, mediated or not, is powerful, riveting and memorable. And these effects are automatic, so

important to survival that they don't require much thought or analysis (p. 127).

An important side-effect of spectatorship is that while a viewer's memory of strikingly violent or negative scenes in the news is likely to be enhanced, the memory of less dramatic material preceding these scenes is actually inhibited. Reeves and Nass reported that in experiments where they placed gory visuals in news stories, people did not learn more about current events. Instead they remembered the compelling visuals "at the expense of information about current events" (Reeves & Nass, 1996, p. 128, see also Newhagen & Reeves, 1992), a finding that puts spectatorship at odds with the more information centered aspects of surveillance.

### **The Sublime**

**W**HILE the shift in the Renaissance towards naturalistic representation has often been regarded in terms of the emergence of scientific and objectivist principles, it is clear that it is not merely the plausible narration of sacred events that was the aim of such representation -- but a religious emotional reaction that such iconicity may help invoke.

At its most intense, this emotional response may reach the level of what Kant and others have labeled the "sublime." Postmodern thinkers have revived this concept (see Lyotard, 1993) and recent attempts to explain the fascination with grotesque images have turned to the sublime and Burke's view of this experience (Weigel, 2001; Debatin, 2002):

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (Burke, 1901, p. 36).

In spectatorship, then, the focus shifts away from informational content of images to their affective impact (with the latter being capable of inhibiting the viewer's ability to remember the former.) Those emotions elicited, especially when spectatorship is drawn into the sublime, may be awe or fascination, as well as acute reactions that may traumatize. The role of spectatorship and the appeal of the sublime in the news will be discussed further in following sections.

What has been argued so far is this; that there is a range of interconnected yet distinct functions that the news photograph helps to fulfill, functions that entail subtle yet important changes of focus across content, source and observer, as well as repositionings of that fundamental relationship. Subtle though they may be, the play across these categories throws light on the current use of images as weapons within the ongoing psychological conflict that is part of the "war on terror." To pursue these connections, I shall now consider the relationship between the news media and terrorism, before turning to case studies of a set of images that have dominated the headlines in recent times; pictures of the crumbling Twin Towers in the attacks of 9/11, photographs of Iraqi prisoner abuse, and the terrorist execution of American hostage Nicholas Berg.

### **Terror and the Media**

**A**s many scholars have pointed out, terrorists and the media have long shared a complex and intimate relationship, one feeding upon the other (Laqueur, 1999; Greenberg, 2002; Tuman, 2003). So entwined is the relationship, that it is argued that terrorism can best be understood as fundamentally a communication process, however repulsive its means and message. Indeed, Tuman (2003) points out that the central distinction between murder, assault, arson or destruction of property, and acts of terrorism, is the latter's intent to communicate a message to a larger set of audiences than those targeted in the attack itself. As such, terrorists become, in the terms of Molotch and Lester (1974), the definitive example of agents with "disruptive access" to the media, those who lacking more direct routes to publicity rely on "making news" by generating surprise, shock, or some violent form of "trouble."

In fact, drawing and sustaining the attention of the news media, even through acts of violence, is more difficult than it might appear. Traditionally, coverage of terrorist acts outside of the viewer's home nation is surprisingly limited. Before the events of 9/11, as little as two to three per cent of terrorist incidents that occurred annually worldwide received coverage in the U.S. press (Picard, 1993). While the "war on terror" has altered the climate of coverage somewhat, it is unlikely that this pattern will change substantially over time.

Equally, in a world filled with violence, death and tragedy, the threshold for what is both dramatic and terrifying is continually being raised (see Newhagen & Reeves, 1992). Terrorists must find ever-more destructive acts to garner the same level of media attention or, arguably, to have the same level of impact on its target audiences. The terror campaign of al Qaeda presents a classic demonstration of this principle, with the group committing increasing more ambitious attacks before its grisly showcase event of 9/11.

### **Twin Tower Images**

**T**HE twin towers of the World Trade Center aflame and crumbling was perhaps the most indelible image to emerge from the attacks of September 11, 2001. Watched live by viewers not merely across America but around the globe, it was the epicenter of the day's tragic events and the image that filled most front pages, both in the United States and elsewhere (see Zelizer, 2002; Debatin, 2002). It was also the site most featured in news coverage of the day's events. A study of the first eight hours of 9/11 reportage by major network and cable stations found that in a range of topics covered, the WTC attack was the one used most frequently (Mogensen et al., 2002).

One feature of the tragedy, remarked upon by a range of news commentators and scholars alike, was the symbolism of this central target. The World Trade Center was struck not because it was a target of military importance in any conventional sense. Nor, for that matter, was the killing of thousands in the buildings the primary objective. Rather the crashing of the plane into the twin towers was, perhaps more chillingly, merely a means to an end. The central aim of the terrorists, as is invariably the case with terrorism, was to send a message. And in a media world in which the visual image is given priority, is unsurprising that this message was created in the form of gruesome and nightmarish

images of destruction that would be flashed around the world, horrifying the west and sending a message of victory to those sympathetic to the terrorist cause. What was sought and achieved was not property destruction or mass murder per se, but the use of these to create *an instrument of war* – the powerful and chilling image of the World Trade Center ablaze. In the event, the complete collapse of the towers -- an eventuality that it would have been difficult to predict -- was a gruesome bonus for al Qaeda. It helped to make the attack an especially decisive shot in a “sign war” where the signifier could become at least as potent a weapon as that which it signified.

As a story to be covered first and foremost through pictures, the events of 9/11 pushed all the right visual buttons to gain the maximum amount of reportage, and to have a potent effect as an image weapon. The fact that the twin towers image spans all of the categories of function discussed in this paper not only made it irresistible to journalists, but also strengthened its impact on audiences. That the image showed acute danger on American soil mobilized the media’s surveillance function, just as the sense that one was witnessing a moment of history (however grotesque) guaranteed attention from observers and justified unprecedented amounts of news coverage. At the same time, the sight of flames blossoming from these towering structures of concrete and steel carried spectatorship into the domain of the sublime. Small wonder that many viewers later reported they felt as if they “couldn’t stop watching news about the terrorist attacks” (Perse and Signorielli et al., 2002).

The uncomfortable truth is that television journalism especially -- with its penchant for the visually exciting and the dramatic -- is inevitably attracted to scenes that create spectatorship, a fact that the media-savvy terrorist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knows full well. This was graphically demonstrated by the endless repetition of the twin towers image in the weeks that followed 9/11. Such images failed to function as surveillance, since no new information was supplied in the repetition. Nor could they be justified easily in terms of witnessing, since the moment of history had been experienced and had passed. Yet the visual stimulation of spectatorship remained, and could be re-experienced, in all its fascination and terror, with each repetition.

The combination of the threat to survival carried through surveillance and the emotional potency of spectatorship were enhanced by the immediacy of live witnessing. In the words of sociologist Elemer Hankiss (2001, p. 3):

In our virtual world created by the media we have already witnessed, many times, the death of hundreds and thousands of people...But there has ever been a time lag. A couple of hours, days, months between the event and the moment we were watching them, often in a bowdlerized version, on the screen. September 11 was perhaps the first time that we faced death “live”; “in real time.”<sup>3</sup>

The psychological impact of these images was considerable. The collapse of the twin towers was replayed so relentlessly that concerns were voiced about the effect of viewing the image, with the scene regarded as a prime trigger for trauma, especially among the young and in those intimately connected with the disaster (Hankiss, 2001). This repetition, it is argued, increased psychological effects of these graphic images on viewers, perhaps by serving as a cue to recall the initial horror and dread. Research into

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

the psychological aftermath of 9/11 found that viewing more graphic images of the terrorist attacks and its aftermath was found to be related to higher levels of stress reactions (Perse and Signorielli et al., 2002). Many people said they were upset “quite a bit” or a “great deal” when reminded of the event (30% on September 14-16, in Schuster et al., 2001) and six to nine weeks later, 11% of those polled said they had images they could not get out of their minds (Snyder & Park, 2002).

In fact, signs of traumatic reaction to 9/11 were both widespread and of surprising duration. A poll on September 13 found that 71% of people said they were depressed by the terrorist attacks. Six months later 21% of people polled still said that they had cried in the previous two weeks as a direct result of thinking about the terrorist attacks (CNN, 3/8/02). A comprehensive account of these and similar findings is offered by Perse & Signorielli et al 2002; Snyder & Park 2002.

While the Twin Towers attack is perhaps the definitive example of a visual weapon, other instances have been important to news coverage of the “war on terror” in recent years.

### **Photographs of abuse**

**I**T is ironic that, the photographs of prisoner abuse issuing from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq may have also have been an attempt to create a variant of image weapon, albeit one that backfired disastrously.

Despite government claims that those involved in the abuse were rogue individuals among prison staff, there was more than a little suspicion that both the acts of abuse and the gruesome pictures, first revealed by CBS News, were part of an orchestrated attempt to “break” stubborn prisoners. In the words of the *Baltimore Sun*, the belief persisted that “U.S. authorities adapted interrogation techniques to exploit the religious and cultural sensitivities of Arabs” with the abuse specifically designed to “affront Muslim religious taboos and use sexual shame as a method for breaking down prisoners' resistance to interrogation” (Matthews, 5/23/04, p.5A)

To take specific examples, one widely circulated image showed Pfc. Lynndie England with a naked inmate on a leash, a demeaning position arguably made especially effective by the Islamic attitude to masculine honor and their view of women as “non-aggressive.” Other photographs of the servicewoman pointing to prisoners' genitals break the same taboos, while the many instances of prisoners being pictured naked would be especially shocking to Muslims, since Islamic law prohibits men from being uncovered from their navels to their knees.

New light is shed on even the most apparently straightforward of the Abu Ghraib images when cultural mores and taboos are taken into account. Being menaced, and in some photographs, apparently attacked by guard dogs would seem intimidating in its own right. Yet the image takes on new meaning when one considers the fact that Muslims, who must remain “ritually pure” before prayer, fear being contaminated by touching certain animals that shed hair, such as a dog or cat, before their daily worship. (ibid; see also Strathern & Stewart, 2004).

If the abuse itself was the practice of deliberate, if cold-blooded, psychological techniques, then the creation of images of these events may have been no less calculated. Appearing on CNN's *American Morning* (5/10/04), an attorney for Pfc. Lynndie England claimed that that she was posed for the shots by superiors, with photos “staged” by

intelligence officials who were running the prison at the time. Presumably these photographs were used as psychological weapons to break other Islamic prisoners, who feared the same treatment. Alternatively, given the Islamic culture, the very fact that prisoners knew they were being photographed may itself have been viewed as a useful form of psychological pressure, regardless of what was done with the photographs.

Arguably, what was being created at Abu Ghraib were images which -- appealing fundamentally to the subject's concerns over surveillance and exploitation -- were intended to prompt fear for self in the observer. Their release to a mass-audience, however, changed that dynamic entirely.

Image weapons are typically designed to deliver different messages to at least two distinct audiences. The destruction of the twin towers or the execution of Nicholas Berg were meant, quite deliberately, to speak differently to those sympathetic to the terrorists' cause -- conveying, presumably, a comforting sense of the power and determination of those opposing the "evil" Americans -- while simultaneously striking fear into their enemies. One might argue that news pictures and footage of American tanks, troops and battle helicopters pouring into Iraq during the invasion had much the same purposes and audiences in mind. However if the prisoner abuse pictures were staged as psychological weapons, then they were not designed with such dual intentions. Whatever cultural nuances might have been included to fine-tune the impact of the images on their target group -- the Iraqi prisoners -- their message was fundamentally received the same way across diverse audiences, with U.S. viewers generally being as appalled and shocked by the pictures as America's opponents. Just as clearly, these images were never intended to reach the eyes of a home audience, a point made with surprising frankness by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld before Congress.

Once the photographs were leaked, their trajectory mirrored those of other image weapons discussed in this paper, the pictures spreading rapidly across the globe via broadcast and print news agencies and through the Internet. Here their impact was primarily as a type of spectatorship -- sordid images that inspired only disgust and revulsion -- free of the sort of surveillance-threat associations that the images would have prompted in their original targets.

### **Berg execution**

**S**TILL more repugnant than the photographs of prisoner abuse were the images of the decapitation of American Nicholas Berg, kidnapped and executed in Iraq in May 2004. In one of the most graphic and gruesome of a spate of incidents, Berg's killers filmed themselves cutting off the head of the independent civilian contractor, allegedly as a response to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners.

The deliberation that had gone into the creation of the video, as an image weapon, is telling. For example, care has been taken to create symmetry in the image, the victim placed at the center of a group of executioners, in front of the middle man of the lineup who was seen reading the statement. At the same time, Berg was posed lower and in front of the group, so that they towered above him in a manner that underscored both their menace and the victim's helplessness. Berg was clothed in a convict-style orange jump-suit, a striking contrast to the dark and more sinister clothes of his captors. The masks of these executioners served not only to hide their identities but also to highlight the threat of the group (a common strategy amongst militant groups worldwide), a point

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

highlighted by the fact that most carried weapons. This positioning was repeated, with variations, across a number of similar kidnapping tapes that have emerged in Iraq in recent months.

In a similar way, the Berg footage adhered to a simple but effective narrative ordering. The statement of "justification," was followed by a threat that what the viewer was about to see was merely a taste of what was to come ("Coffins will be arriving to you one after the other, slaughtered just like this!") which in its turn was followed by the gruesome climax of the scenario. The victim's head was hacked from the body to an accompaniment of shouts of "Allah Akbar" -- "God is great." As unsophisticated as the filming may have been technically, it is clear that the crafting of this execution as a weapon had been careful and deliberate. And there seems little doubt that the killers would have expected the news agencies to deliver their vicious drama both to their primary audience in America and to their secondary audience; potential supporters and sympathizers.

The Berg execution offered a disturbing twist on the use of the news media as a delivery system for deploying terror images. When video of the beheading surfaced, editors of both broadcast and print journalism were faced with the difficult decision of how much of it to show, either as stills or as moving images. In this case, both TV stations and newspapers in the United States and across the West played it safe. ABC's *World News Tonight* and NBC *Nightly News* ended the tape just as the killer drew his knife. CBS *Evening News* went further, showing the killer grasp Berg by his hair, push him to the ground and put the knife to his neck, but stopping well short of the decapitation itself. Both MSNBC and CNN stopped before the knife was brandished, while Fox *News* -- after not showing the knife being drawn throughout the day -- did so by the following night. In print news, many papers carried front page pictures showing only the statement being read or, more infrequently, the knife being drawn (see Johnson, 2004).

Yet in today's wired age, such delicacy counted for less than it once might. The very fact that news outlets had alerted the public to the existence of the video meant that millions went online to see the full footage being streamed at an Arab language web-site linked to al Qaeda. The online search-engine company Lycos reported that in the first 24 hours after it was released, the Berg video was the most sought-after item on the Internet. The al Qaeda-linked site where the video was first posted had to be closed because it was attracting so much traffic that it threatened to crash the Malaysian company that hosted it. Within a week, a second web site offering the video had had nearly half a million users download it.

Once again, these images offered a mixture of dramatic spectatorship, with content that could be expected to trigger its viewer's surveillance-survival instincts. Interestingly, many of the debates that emerged in response to the incident also played implicitly on assumptions based on these differing positions. *Reason* magazine editor Charles Paul Freund observed: "Usually butchery is something that is revealed, by journalism or legal investigations, like the My Lai massacre [in Vietnam] or the Katyn Forest [a World War II massacre committed by the Soviet army]. But here's a case where a group *boasts* of its butchery on the Internet" (quoted in Garvin & de Vise, 5/16/04 p. 5). Here what was being foregrounded was a view of the image as judicial witness, while the image's intent to fulfill surveillance and spectatorship aims (and so inspire terror) was ignored.

Similarly, some news editors were amazed to receive complaints that the video had not been screened in its entirety, with *Fox News* receiving 500 calls in a matter of hours from annoyed viewers. An explanation in the *Miami Herald* (ibid.,) showed how some viewers were regarding the images not from the point of view of spectatorship, but again from the perspective of judicial witness:

the complaint is that the media aren't showing *enough* atrocities: Now that the media have published so many photos of American troops abusing captives in an Iraqi prison, it's only fair to show the video of Berg screaming as his al Qaeda tormenters sawed his head off...

### Conclusion

**I**N the nervous aftermath of 9/11, journalist Steven Luxenberg wrote: “We come to work each day now, my media colleagues and I, thinking that we are more than providers of information. We fear we are agents of terror”:

“In this time of civil emergency, when nervous Americans want to know how to protect their families and themselves, the mass media can easily become a weapon of mass trepidation... where’s the line between distributing information that helps readers to prepare and spreading fear that helps the terrorists.” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9/18/01, p. 6).

It is a dilemma that becomes more acute when those waging war employ image weapons that rely primarily on the news as a delivery system. Journalists are placed in an unenviable position, caught between their instinct to allow their audience to “see for themselves” as *witnesses*, while knowing such coverage also positions that audience in the front line of an increasingly sophisticated psychological operation. More troubling still, the development and accessibility of the Internet and inevitable curtailment of mainstream journalism’s role as gatekeeper means that even when news organizations do move cautiously, they are now unable to block the most shocking images from reaching the public.

As these image wars continue – as they inevitably will – questions remain unanswered. While the perspective I have taken here to these issues is, as McLuhan counseled, one primarily of investigation rather than of moral debate, it is clear that this use of images raises ethical dilemmas that must be addressed. What is and isn’t morally acceptable in an era in which visual propaganda is triumphant and transformed – and who will draw the lines? How far can the news media justify in its attraction to images ripe for spectatorship when the broadcast of these also suit the terrorist agenda? And what, if any, alternative approach would allow journalism to continue to perform its vital surveillance duties without transmitting terror?

### NOTES

1. In fact, the press was using the photographic process as a metaphor before it entered journalistic practice. Newspaper photography, as opposed to engravings, came in 1880 when the first mechanical reproduction of a photograph was printed in a newspaper: "A Scene in Shanty Town" in the *New York Daily Graphic*. But it was not until 1904 when the first true "picture

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

newspaper" was launched in the shape of the *Daily Mirror*, a British daily that illustrated its pages solely with photographs. America followed suit in 1919 with New York's *Illustrated Daily News*.

2. While this is true in many cases, there are other instances where "live coverage" relies more on the codes and presentational practices of television news than it does genuine on-the-spot reportage. This is an issue I am currently studying.

3. The amount of death directly witnessed by viewers in 9/11 coverage is debatable, since generally the news media in the United States -- if not other parts of the world -- were careful to avoid shots of corpses and people falling to their deaths. But at the same time, it seems clear that those watching the tragedy unfold were well aware that what they were seeing would result in a high death toll.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Anderson, J. A., & Meyer, T. P. (1975). Functionalism and the mass media. *Journal of Broadcasting*, 19, 11-22.

Aquinas, T. (1948). *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York. Quoted in M. Stephens (1998). *The rise of the image, the fall of the word*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barnhurst, K. (1994). *Seeing the newspaper*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text*. London: Fontana.

Baudrillard, J. (1995). *The Gulf war did not take place*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Becker, K. (1992). Photojournalism and the tabloid press. In Dahlgren, P. & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Journalism and Popular Culture* (pp 130-153). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bennett W. L. (1996). *News: The politics of illusion*. New York: Longman.

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London/New York: Penguin.

Bogart, L. (1980). *Television news as entertainment*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Burke E. (1901). On the sublime and beautiful. In *On taste - on the sublime and beautiful: Reflections on the French revolution. A letter to the noble lord* (pp. 29-148). New York: Collier.
- Cassirer, E. (1954). *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Debatin, B. (2002). Plane wreck with spectators: The semiotics of terror. In B.S. Greenberg (Ed.), *Communication and terrorism: Public and media response to 9/11*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Dickey, C. (2004). The Iraqi horror picture show. *Newsweek Online* (5/12/04).
- Dunsmore, B. (1996). The next war: Live? *Press Politics*, 1 (3), 3-5.
- Garvin, G. & de Vise, D. (2004). Harrowing images scar nation's psyche. *Miami Herald* (5/16/04, p. 5A).
- Gombrich, E. H. (1982). *The image and the eye*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gray, C. H. (2003). Posthuman soldiers in postmodern war. *Body and Society*, 9 (4), 25-37.
- Greenberg, B. S. (Ed.). (2002). *Communication and terrorism: Public and media response to 9/11*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Gross, L. (1974). Art history as ethnography and as social analysis. *Studies In The Anthropology of Visual Communication*, 1 (1), 51-56.
- Hall, S. (1973). The determinations of news photographs. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.), *The manufacture of news: Deviance, social problems and the mass media* (pp. 176-190). London: Constable.
- Hartley, J. (1982). *Understanding news*. London: Routledge.

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

- Hammond, P. (2004). Postmodernity goes to war. Retrieved December 5, 2004 from [www.spiked-online.com/articles](http://www.spiked-online.com/articles).
- Hankiss, E. (2001). *Symbols of Destruction*. Paper for Social Science Research Council, New York. Retrieved on January 3, 2004 from [www.ssrc.org/sept11](http://www.ssrc.org/sept11).
- Jaubert, A. (1989). *Making people disappear: An amazing chronicle of photographic deception*. Washington, DC: Pergamon Brassey.
- Johnson, P. (2004). A death caught on tape: Should it run or not? *USA Today* (5/12/04, p. 4D).
- Kellner D. (1999). From Vietnam to the Gulf: Postmodern wars? In Bibby, M. (Ed.), *The Vietnam war and postmodernity* (pp. 218-219). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Laqueur, W.(1999). *The new terrorism: Fanaticism and the arms of mass destruction*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lasswell, H. (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 37-51). New York: Harper and Row.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1948). Mass communication, popular taste, and organized social action. In L. Bryson (Ed.), *The communication of ideas* (pp. 95--118). New York: Harper and Row.
- Luxenberg, S. (2001). Journalists face dilemmas in times of national crisis. *Philadelphia Inquirer* 10/5/01, p. A23).
- Lyotard, J. (1993). *The postmodern explained*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Matthews, M. (2004). Abuse tailored to arabs, experts say. *Baltimore Sun* (5/23/04, p. 5A).

- McLeod, D., E. Perse, Signorielli, N. & Courtright J.A. (1993). Public perceptions and evaluations of the functions of the media in the Persian Gulf war. In B.S. Greenberg & W. Gantz (Eds.), *Desert storm and the mass media* (pp. 197-212). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Messaris, P. (1997). *Visual persuasion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1986). Television and interpersonal behavior: Codes of perception and response. In Gumpert, G. & R. Cathcart, (Eds.), *Inter/media: Interpersonal communication in a media world* (3rd ed) (pp. 253-272). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1992). *The reconfigured eye: Visual truth in the post-photographic era*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1994). *Picture theory: Essays on verbal and visual representation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Mogensen, K., et al (2002). How TV news covered the crisis: The content of CNN, CBS, ABC, NBC and Fox. In B. S. Greenberg (Ed.), *Communication and terrorism: Public and media response to 9/11* (pp. 101-120). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Molotch, H. & Lester, M. (1974). News as purposive behavior: On the strategic use of routine events, accidents, and scandals. *American Sociological Review*, 39 (2), 101-112.
- Morris, B., & Nydahl, J. (1983). Toward analyses of live television broadcasts. *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (3), 195-202.
- Newhagen, J. E. & Reeves, B. (1992). This evening's bad news: Effects of compelling negative television news images on memory. *Journal of Communication*, 42 (2), 25-41.
- Page, C. (1996). *U.S. official propaganda during the Vietnam War 1965-1973*. London & New

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

York: Leicester University Press.

- Perse, E. and Signorielli, N., et al (2002). Public perceptions of media functions at the beginning of the war on terrorism. In B. S. Greenberg (Ed), *Communication and terrorism: Public and media response to 9/11* (pp. 39-52) Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Picard, R. G. (1993). *Media portrayals of terrorism*. Ames, Io: Iowa State University Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1991). In J. Hoopes (Ed.), *Peirce on signs: Writings on semiotics by Charles Sanders Peirce*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Reeves, B. and Nass, C. (1996). *The media equation: How people treat computers, television, and new media like real people and places*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schiller, D. (1977). Realism, photography and journalistic objectivity in 19th century America. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, 4 (2), 86-98.
- Schuster, M.A., et al. (2001). A national survey of stress reactions after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 345, 1507-1512.
- Seib, P. (1997). *Headline diplomacy*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Shoemaker, P. (1996). Hardwired for news: Using biological and cultural evolution to explain the surveillance function. *Journal of Communication*, 46 (3), 32-42.
- Simmel, G. (1908/1950). The metropolis and the mental life. *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (pp. 409- 424). New York: Free Press.
- Sontag, S. (1973). *On photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Stephens, M. (1998). *The rise of the image, the fall of the word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Snyder, L.B., & Park, C. L. (2002). National studies of stress reactions and media exposure to

the attacks. In B. S. Greenberg (Ed.), *Communication and terrorism: Public and media responses to 9/11* (pp. 177-192). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Strathern A. & P. Stewart (2004). *Contesting rituals: Islam and practices of identity making*. (Carolina Academic Press Ritual Studies Monographs). Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Tuggle, C. A., & Huffman, S. (1999). Live news reporting: Professional judgment or technological pressure? A national survey of television news directors and senior reporters. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 43(4), 492-505.

Tuggle, C. A., & Huffman, S. (2001). Live reporting in television news: Breaking news or black holes? *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 45 (2), 335-442.

Tuman, J. (2003). *Communicating terror: The rhetorical dimensions of terrorism*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. (1988). Enacted sense-making in organization: The Mann Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 628-652.

Weigel, M. (2001). Terrorism and the sublime: Or why we keep watching. Retrieved June 2, 2002 from *Television Archive*: [tvnews3.televisionarchive.org/tvarchive/html/article](http://tvnews3.televisionarchive.org/tvarchive/html/article)

Wenner, K.S. (2001). Getting the picture. *American Journalism Review*, 23 (8), 32-33.

White, E. (2001). CNN whups butt in cable news race. *Media Life* [online newsletter]. Retrieved November 5, 2003 from [www.medialifemagazine.com](http://www.medialifemagazine.com). (9/21/01).

Wittstock, M. (1991). Disaster victims say media made their trauma worse. *The Times*, (7/1/91, Home News).

Wright, C. R. (1964). Functional analysis and mass communication. In L. A. Dexter & D. M.

*Surveillance, Witnessing and Spectatorship:  
The News and the 'War of Images'*

White (Eds.), *People, society, and mass communication* (pp. 91-109). New York: Free Press.

Wright, C.R. (1986). *Mass communications: A sociological perspective* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Random House.

Zelizer, B. (1995). Journalism's 'last' stand: Wirephoto and the discourse of resistance. *Journal of Communication*. 45 (2), 78-92.

Zelizer, B. (1998). *Remembering to forget: Holocaust memory through the camera's eye*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zelizer, B. (2002). Photography, journalism and trauma. In A. Stuart & B. Zelizer (Eds.), *Journalism After September 11* (pp. 48-68). London & New York: Routledge.

---