

Fear in the frame

The Abu Ghraib images are an indication of the degree to which both Iraq and the occupying powers themselves have been brutalised by the invasion and occupation, writes **Haim Bresheeth***

We get up in the morning, and a human face stares at us from the front page of the paper -- a human face we cannot quite see, yet will never forget: hands clasped behind the neck, the body naked, exposed, defenceless and frightened, with the knees pressed together, protecting the genitals in a hopeless gesture. The face contorted by an unimaginable fear, fuelled by the other participants -- two soldiers, faceless, the way soldiers are, holding onto two dogs, pulling at the leash, about to be let at the prisoner.

He knows it, as well as we do when looking at this horrible image. One additional figure, perhaps the all-powerful privatised agency operative, pointing a finger at the terrified victim, maybe telling him to kneel down, so the dogs can get at him. Let your imagination loose, try to imagine humans doing this to each other, in the name of freedom and democracy. And then, tell yourself that this is just an isolated incident, nothing to do with you; until tomorrow, anyway, until the next pictures in the paper. See if you can achieve this.

Ten years ago, on the occasion of *Schindler's List* being screened in France, Claude Lanzmann, the legendary filmmaker responsible for 12-part documentary *Shoah*, in a phrase made famous since, said: "I deeply believe that there are things that cannot and should not be represented." This statement was referring to the fictional treatment of reality using Spielberg's film as his foil, but in the same piece published in *Le Monde*, he also said that had he known of the existence of a secret film -- depicting the activities of the Nazis in Auschwitz, including scenes in the gas chambers -- he would personally have destroyed it despite its undoubted historical value.

Many, including myself, thought then that Lanzmann was wrong to utter such words; many must share the same opinion today, particularly in light of the publication of the Abu Ghraib pictures. This constant assault on the senses, clearly defying any talk of "rogue elements" and "isolated cases", drives home the crucial role of the media in a democracy, or in countries which want to be regarded as democratic but which wage illegal wars in the face of great public concern and dissent. The majority of the populations of most European countries, including Britain, were clearly against the war in Iraq. The great public demonstrations through many capitals were dismissed by the leaders of the US, UK, Spain and Italy, to name a few.

The propaganda machine, much more refined than that of the 1930s, dug up those well-worn lies and half truths, speaking of WMD capable of being deployed in 45 minutes, describing the terrible destruction wreaked upon Iraq as efforts at "rebuilding" a country, and as a selfless act by Western powers on behalf of the people of Iraq, a selfless act of liberation from a "republic of fear".

It must now be clear, at least to those who do not wish to delude themselves, that the republic of fear is alive and well. It is run by the "coalition" forces, and specifically by

the US and UK governments. It is not run openly, democratically, morally, or on behalf of the people of Iraq. The system in place, like that in Guantanamo Bay, or in the Palestinian occupied territories, is a system where no law prevails, where redress is not possible, where no transparency exists, no rights are accorded to most of the Iraqi population, and where inhuman treatment of suspects, in most cases people picked up at roadblocks, has become normal and officially sanctioned.

Beyond the few high-profile cases uncovered by various media outlets, many remain of which we know nothing (as is now openly admitted by the White House). Some may never be uncovered. Like in the case of Saddam, many instances of abuse will not be unearthed until the tyrant is removed from his throne of power; many may have to wait for occupation to end. The fact that such horrific pictures emerge, day after day, should make us reflect on the deep, brutalising effects this war is having on many otherwise normal people.

Someone, somewhere, it seems to suggest, saw it all as harmless fun, an acceptable element of our civilisation, a civilisation that defines itself by conflict, and by "Shock and Awe". Indeed, shock and awe is what we see in the eyes of one Iraqi, being set upon by two dogs held by his torturers, in a picture evoking Nazi horrors. Not only was it thought correct to use this tactic whilst attacking and destroying large parts of Iraq, but it has now become the yardstick of behaviour, the rationale and *raison d'être* of a brutal and brutalising occupation regime fast on its way to achieving new records of inhuman treatment. We see the man who was a postal clerk until a few weeks ago now acting as "investigator", in a country he does not understand, in a culture he was educated against, in a language he does not know.

Despite the romantic utterance of Lanzmann, we can now all realise how closely we depend on the few who, plunged into this pit of brutality and inhumanity, can still retain their dignity, despite their horror, and say: "I do not agree! I do not accept! Shall not collaborate!" Without them, we would all be collaborators, torturers and sadists -- by the very fact that we would continue to support this mad and illegal, illogical and immoral occupation. Without those pictures, and the horrific stories that they harbour behind the pixels of fear, we would be unable to claim what we mostly knew beforehand -- that no aggressive, one-sided, racist occupation could bring anything positive to Iraq, or anywhere else. Not only will this occupation brutalise beyond recognition the society on which it has been inflicted, the society inflicting the pain will not remain unaffected.

The simple proof is Israeli society, which has been brutalised to a point which is easily discernible outside Israel, but barely visible within the country itself -- in itself a measure of the depth of brutalisation. For the British chief of staff to say that some "rogue elements" have acted "irresponsibly" is quite revealing. The rogue elements may well be the soldiers who are prepared to stand up and be counted, not the torturers, who seem to be operating to an agreed set of guidelines.

The system of torture and inhumanity has indeed become the rule, not the exception. It seems that those who have promised to give us and the Iraqi people a new kind of society, have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams: The New World Order is one built on naked power, military, financial and cultural; the "shock and awe" is not a mere military icon, but a cultural, political and ideological malaise, which, unless we

rid ourselves of it, will consume every atom of our being, our identity, our sanity. It is not just Bush, Blair, and Rumsfeld that should go -- it is the whole sickly *zeitgeist* that they have forced upon the world society that should be excised.

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