

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Torture, or 'Good Old American Pornography'?

By *SUSAN J. BRISON*

The war in Iraq may be the first war to be won or lost in cyberspace. In the battle for the hearts and minds of the Arab world, the deadliest weapons may, in the end, be images, and the digital photos and videos of abuse shot at Abu Ghraib may turn out to be America's undoing by friendly fire. Whether the videotaped decapitation of Nicholas Berg shown on Arab Web sites will ultimately help or hurt the U.S. war effort is not yet clear. In this new "theater of operations" as on more-traditional battlefields, however, things are not always what they seem, as The Boston Globe and The Daily Mirror recently discovered to their chagrin. The Globe's publication of what turned out to be staged pornographic photos of U.S. soldiers raping Iraqi women led to self-castigation by the editorial board, and The Daily Mirror's unwitting publication of faked photos of British troops abusing Iraqi prisoners forced the paper's editor to resign.

(Chronicle photo illustration;  
Original photo from Polaris)

The newspapers should have gotten a heads-up from the BBC report last month of a "set of photographs... circulating on Arabic-language Web sites. It apparently shows two Iraqi women, both wearing traditional black robes, being raped at gunpoint by men described as wearing U.S. Army uniforms. These pictures do not seem genuine: the uniforms do not seem right. ... But the damage has been done." The source for the photos may have been the hard-core-porn Web site IraqBabes, which offered "exclusive shocking sex in war videos," featuring "real soldiers" and "Iraq women." The Web-site registrant took the site offline last month after being informed that it was being used as anti-American propaganda, but images from the site are still readily available

elsewhere on the Web.

As commercial porn was being mistaken for photos of real torture, the photos of actual torture at Abu Ghraib were being equated with porn. The day U.S. lawmakers viewed the roughly 1,800 still photos and an undisclosed number of videos from Abu Ghraib that Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld had warned were "sadistic, cruel, and inhuman," CBS News reported that the images "amounted to hard-core porn." Given that the Abu Ghraib photos depicted acts of sexual abuse including Iraqi men forced to masturbate and Iraqi women commanded to expose their breasts, that characterization seems apt.

What are we to make of this: porn that looks like actual torture, actual torture that looks like porn? Some claimed the similarity revealed that what might have appeared to be torture wasn't really so bad after all. Rush Limbaugh wondered what the fuss was all about, since the photos from Abu Ghraib "look like standard good old American pornography." That in turn led Frank Rich in The New York Times to ridicule this likening of "wartime atrocities" to "an entertainment industry that, however deplorable to Islam, has more fans in our Christian country than Major League Baseball." Although Rich's article is steeped in irony, his determination to distinguish the Abu Ghraib photos ("atrocities") from pornography ("entertainment") could be taken to suggest that anything more popular in the United States than baseball must be morally unproblematic -- even Christians like it! -- except to those morally benighted Muslims.

But the similarities between American-style torture and hard-core porn are difficult not to notice and, given our tolerant, even self-congratulatory, attitude toward pornography, why should we be so shocked when torture takes this form? Why should it be cause for international alarm when sexually degrading, dehumanizing things are done to Iraqi prisoners (and photographed) when doing the same things to women around the world (and photographing them) for a multibillion-dollar pornography industry is considered entertainment -- the sort of all-American fun enjoyed by U.S. troops and available to anyone with access to the Internet?

An obvious response is that it makes all the difference whether the pornographic images are real or faked -- that is, whether or not the people who are apparently being abused agreed to be depicted as humiliated and degraded for others' fun and profit. But as we've recently learned, given today's cybertechnology, it can be impossible to separate fact from fiction in photos. And even if we could determine, in some reliable way, whether the depictions are real or faked, it is not obvious that selling images of faked abuse -- and getting pleasure out of them -- would then be morally (and politically) unproblematic. Suppose the Iraqis in the photos from Abu Ghraib had been civilians off the street willing to hire out their bodies for pornographic use -- not to U.S. soldiers, let's say, but to private U.S. contractors (who were, incidentally, also involved in the abuses at Abu Ghraib). Should we be less outraged had the photos been part of a business venture? Should we be less shamed by the behavior of our fellow citizens and less concerned about the repercussions for our international reputation?

In addition, those familiar with the pornography industry are well aware that some apparently voluntary participants are in fact coerced and shamed into pornography (and prostitution). They are "broken in" by methods similar to those used to "soften up" Iraqi prisoners of war to get them to cooperate: After they are abducted or lured away from their homes or off the street, they are photographed while being sexually abused and then forced into submission by the threat that the photos will be shown to their families and friends. Some things that look like -- and are marketed as -- "good old American pornography" are, in fact, torture. That may make it hard for some people to recognize certain kinds of acts as torture, even as they are perpetrating them. Amnesty International reported last month that NATO troops and U.N. administrators are largely to blame for a rapidly growing sex-slavery industry in Kosovo, in which hundreds of women and girls (many of them under age) are tortured and raped.

The rape of women by invading armies is a well-known tactic of war -- so well known that it has typically been taken for granted -- but what are we to make of peacekeepers who rape? Do they consider it torture? Apparently not. Michael A. Sells reported, in

The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia, that "in the summer of 1992, U.N. peacekeepers under the command of Canadian General Lewis MacKenzie frequented the rape camp known as Sonja's Kon-Tiki, in the town of Vogosca near Sarajevo. Even after they learned that the women at the Kon-Tiki were Muslim captives held against their will, abused, and sometimes killed, U.N. peacekeepers continued to take advantage of the women there and to fraternize with their nationalist Serb captors."

In an interview on National Public Radio, Peter W. Singer, a scholar at the Brookings Institution and the author of *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, noted that civilian contractors working for DynCorp, a U.S. company hired to train police in the Balkans in the early '90s, were involved in serious sex crimes, including "owning" young women as sex slaves. The site supervisor was so confident that sexual abuse of women would not be considered torture that he even had himself videotaped raping two young women. (Sound familiar?) Not only were the contractors never charged with criminal activity, but the company was later hired by the United States -- to train the police force in post-Saddam Iraq.

In spite of Secretary Rumsfeld's pronouncement en route to Iraq last month that "the real problem is not the photographs -- the real problems are the actions taken to harm the detainees," we -- and the rest of the world -- are also bothered by the fact that the U.S. soldiers in the pictures (and presumably those taking the pictures) clearly got a kick out of what they were doing. In this respect, these photos resemble the postcards circulating in the United States in the early 20th century showing white people smiling and cheering at the lynchings of black men (and sometimes women) -- the photos that showed us that racial animus can amount to a kind of giddy arousal. What revolts us now is not just that black men were lynched, not just that white spectators on the scene were smiling and laughing at the murders of their fellow human beings, but that the people sending the postcards could assume (and rightly so) that their recipients would also get a charge out of the images.

But we must not confuse reality with representation. Each of the

black men depicted in the postcards was actually lynched -- and none of them consented to be. In contrast, the Asian women who posed naked, bound with heavy rope, and hung from trees for a 1984 Penthouse series of photos of eroticized torture presumably consented to (and were financially compensated for) their treatment and its photographic documentation. Besides, those photos, unlike the lynching postcards, were intended to give men sexual pleasure. And we all know, post-Freud, that people's imaginations are filled with all sorts of unfathomable erotic imagery and that we should be wary of suppressing the external representation of such fascinating and perplexing interior landscapes. But the lynchings of black men in the South also had a sexual component; not only did they often involve castration, but the kind of kick some white folks got out of the lynchings (and their depictions) strikes me as not all that different from a form of sexual arousal. I'm sure some white racists' fantastical interior landscapes still include trees with such strange fruit, but that would not be taken to provide sufficient reason for the rest of us to tolerate the widespread production and sale of such images.

Granted, women are rarely killed in the production of pornography, and many women do consent to being depicted in violently degrading ways -- and may even take this to be a sign of just how liberated they are. But that does not mean that we can always safely infer that everyone depicted in these ways has consented and has not been harmed. (Evidence of coercion into pornography is documented in the United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Final Report (1986).) Even if, however, all the participants in pornography had consented and none were harmed, we would still need to consider how pornography influences how other, nonconsenting women are viewed and treated. Suppose some black men consented to pose for realistic-looking lynching photos and that a lot of whites got off on this genre (imagine that it had "more fans than Major League Baseball"). And suppose the widespread consumption of such entertainment influenced how white people generally viewed and treated black people, making it harder than it would otherwise be for black people to overcome a brutal and continuing legacy of contempt and oppression. It is unimaginable that we would

tolerate such a genre of entertainment simply because some whites got off on it. On the contrary, white people getting pleasure out of the genre would make it less, not more, tolerable.

It is a matter of considerable controversy, however, whether nonparticipants in pornography end up being harmed by it. As The New York Times noted after the Penthouse photos appeared, it was not known "whether this pictorial incited a crime that occurred two months later wherein an 8-year-old Chinese girl living in Chapel Hill, N.C., was kidnapped, raped, murdered and left hanging from a tree." We may never know if there was a causal link between the Penthouse photos and this particular sexual murder. And although, at hearings held across the country from 1983 to 1992 on a proposed civil-rights remedy, many women testified before legislators that they had been harmed through others' use of pornography (see Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin's *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*), many people, including many feminists, were -- and continue to be -- skeptical of any link between pornography and violence. However, regardless of our lack of agreement about the causal claims -- and about the political desirability and the constitutional permissibility of restricting pornography -- the Abu Ghraib scandal should enable all of us to see the moral dubiousness of an industry that encourages people to get turned on by imagery showing such callous disrespect for the actual victims of sex crimes.

Of course, sexual expression can be a wonderful, life-affirming thing, and certainly not all that is currently labeled "pornography" is "sadistic, cruel, and inhuman." Surely one advantage of our culture over that promoted by Islamic fundamentalism is that women, as well as men, are able to celebrate their sexuality. But a disturbing amount of hard-core porn produced in the West is based on the view that violently degrading others is arousing, and we need to begin to question the assumption that whatever some people find arousing should be tolerated by the rest of us. (For evidence that, as long as something is presented as porn, it's tolerated in our society, one need look no further than Consumption Junction, a hard-core-porn Web site offering

"nothing but the sickest adult humor, dirty jokes, free video." If one can keep from getting distracted by the offers to click onto "Live Asian Sluts" or "Farm Girls: Bizarre Barnyard Sex," one can view "Rawcore: Raw and Hard-core: Muslim terrorists decapitate an American" -- yes, the video of Nicholas Berg's beheading.)

We know that some of the Arab world's worst prejudices about Western culture as pornographic have been solidified by images from Abu Ghraib. What remains to be seen is whether the images will unsettle -- and ultimately transform -- the way we view our culture ourselves. The fake photos of prisoner abuse remind us that things are not always what they seem. The real ones remind us that sometimes they are.

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