

The Torture Connection / When photographs from Abu Ghraib can't be distinguished from 'good old American pornography,' it's not just the torture we should be questioning

Susan J. Brison

Published 4:00 am, Sunday, July 25, 2004

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. The digital photos and videos of abuse shot at the Abu Ghraib prison 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," things are not always what they seem. Both the Boston Globe and the Daily Mirror discovered this fact last spring, 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.

The newspapers should have gotten a heads-up from the BBC report in May 2004 mentioning 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 in May 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 torture, the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib were being equated with porn. The day U.S. lawmakers viewed the roughly 1,800 still photos from Abu Ghraib that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had warned were "sadistic, cruel and inhuman," CBS News reported the images "amounted to hard-core porn." Given the Abu Ghraib photos depicted acts of sexual abuse, including Iraqi men forced to masturbate and Iraqi women commanded to expose their breasts, the characterization seems apt.

What are we to make of this: porn that looks like torture, torture that looks like porn? Some claimed the similarity revealed that what might have appeared to be torture wasn't so bad after all. Rush Limbaugh wondered what the fuss was all about, because 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") suggests that pornography 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. 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) if doing the same things to women around the world (and photographing them) for a multibillion-dollar pornography industry is considered entertainment?

An obvious response is that it makes all the difference whether 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. Even if we could determine whether the depictions are real or faked, it's not obvious that selling images of faked abuse -- and getting pleasure out of them -- would then be morally (and politically) acceptable. 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?

In addition, those familiar with the porn 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: After being 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 in May 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 book "The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia" (University of California Press, 1996), 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 a May 11 interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio, P.W. Singer, a scholar at the Brookings Institution and the author of "Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry" (Cornell University Press, 2003), 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-Hussein Iraq.

In spite of Secretary Rumsfeld's pronouncement en route to Iraq in May 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 showed us that racial animus can amount to a kind of giddy arousal. What revolts us now is not just that blacks 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 that their recipients would get a charge out of the images.

However, one might reply, we must not confuse reality with representation. We all assume that each of the blacks depicted in the postcards was actually lynched -- and that none of them consented to be. In contrast, it is typically assumed that the Asian women who posed naked while bound with heavy rope hanging from trees for a 1984 Penthouse series of photos of eroticized torture consented to their treatment and its photographic documentation. But, as Catharine A. MacKinnon, professor of law at the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago, said in a recent interview, we cannot simply "assume that the women in Penthouse's Asian-women-bondage issue were there 'consensually.' We have no idea how they got there. We need to know, not assume. Given the abusiveness of the industry, it is wrong to give the pimps the benefit of the doubt."

It's striking, she noted, that "everyone assumed, just from the pictures themselves, that the men in Abu Ghraib were not consenting to what was shown being done to them. They didn't need to interview them and probe their psyches and prior life experiences to find out if they were really enjoying themselves. And they were only being paraded around naked, termed reflexively 'sexual humiliation,' as if it is suddenly an obvious and horrendous form of treatment, tantamount to torture. But when the same thing happens in pornography, a massive industry, one is thought an extremist, or deranged, or even to be insulting to the free will of the women in it, to say the same. ...even when a woman is being tortured in pornography (called torture pornography, expressly), which includes the hoods and the electrodes and the whole nine yards, sometimes in cell settings, sometimes with people in fatigues around them, all that is effectively presumed consensual. ... If someone is shown being harmed, it might be a good idea to assume that she was being harmed, or at least to investigate to find out whether she was harmed."

Some might argue that it makes a difference that those Penthouse photos, unlike the lynching postcards, were intended to give men sexual pleasure. But the lynchings of black men 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 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 some women do consent to being depicted in violently degrading ways -- they may even take this to be a sign of just how liberated they are. But that does not mean 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 U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography Final Report in 1986.) Even if all the participants in pornography had consented and none was harmed, we would still need to consider how pornography influences how other, non-consenting women are viewed and treated. Suppose some black men consented to pose for realistic-looking lynching photos and a lot of whites got off on this genre (imagine that it had "more fans than Major League Baseball"). Suppose the widespread consumption of such entertainment influenced how whites

generally viewed and treated blacks, making it harder than it would otherwise be for blacks 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. Whites getting pleasure out of the genre would make it less, not more, tolerable.

Meanwhile, it is a matter of considerable controversy whether nonparticipants in pornography end up being harmed by it. Two months after the Penthouse photos appeared, 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 pornography and the actual violence (although the man convicted of murdering the girl had spent time on the day of the murder in an adult bookstore where, presumably, that issue of Penthouse was available). 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," Harvard University Press, 1997), many people, including many feminists, were -- and continue to be -- skeptical of any link between pornography and violence. Regardless of our lack of agreement about the causal claims -- and about the political desirability and 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.

Ann Simonton, founder of Media Watch, an organization in Santa Cruz dedicated to challenging "abusive stereotypes and other biased images commonly found in the media," expressed in a recent interview her hope "that we don't miss this occasion to delve into the ways we have normalized sexual sadism in our culture. The right rants about censoring pornography, and the left maintains its silence toward the cruelty and harm this industry promotes. Can we finally have a reasoned debate about the legitimacy of courts awarding more free speech rights to pornographers and pimps than to those used to provide the sex industry's profits? Can we finally begin to teach partnership where respect and intimacy are 'hotter' than master/slave scenarios? My hope is that the horrors of Abu Ghraib will provide the needed impetus to expose our nation's sexual hypocrisies."

Sexual expression can be a wonderful, life-affirming thing, and certainly not all that is currently labeled "pornography" is sadistic, cruel and inhuman.

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 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 on to "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.

Ads by Yahoo!

© 2013 Hearst Communications Inc.

HEARST newspapers