



Comfort, irony, and trivialization: The mediation of torture

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Abstract

This article examines the interrelationship of torture and comfort as a key feature of the United States project of American Empire, examining how the U.S. practice of torture is mediated in American culture, in particular through the distancing strategies of domestication, trivialization, kitschification, and irony. It uses as a framing concept Roger Silverstone's notion of 'proper distance', in particular its formulation of the relationship of mediation to morality, to examine the mechanisms in American culture that enable a level of comfort with the practice of torture. Through an examination of the image icons of the Abu Ghraib prison and the representations of torture at Guantánamo Bay prison, including popular culture representations, trivializing rhetoric, artistic engagements, and kitsch souvenirs, this article analyzes the tensions of proximity and distance that mediate the U.S. practice of torture.

Keywords

image, kitsch, media, nation, proximity, torture

On June 10, 2004, when asked if torture was justified, President George W. Bush answered, 'We're a nation of law. We adhere to laws. We have laws on the books. You might look at these laws, and that might provide comfort to you' (Mayer, 2007: 182). Of the many things one could say about Bush's words, including noting the fact that his administration had in fact condoned the torture of many prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at the prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and at other undisclosed secret prisons, the word 'comfort' demands attention. The trope of comfort, and its invocation as a mode, aesthetic, and style, has been a key factor in enabling the project of American Empire, in particular in the years since 9/11 and in the aims of the so-called global 'war

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on terror'. The culture of comfort in the United States permeates political discourse, social imperatives, and consumerism. It is a primary mechanism through which the project of U.S. imperialism is made palatable to the American public. It is also a primary mode through which the U.S. practice of torture is mediated.

In this article, I address the interrelationship of torture and comfort as a key feature of the United States project of American Empire. My focus is on how the U.S. practice of torture is mediated in American culture, in particular through the distancing strategies of domestication, trivialization, kitschification, and irony. I use as a framing concept Roger Silverstone's notion of 'proper distance', in particular its formulation of the relationship of mediation to morality. Torture is a practice that actively and violently others its victims in its aim to destroy subjectivity, that demands a moral response. Silverstone's concept of proper distance is a key framework through which the relationship of media and morality can be understood, one that provides a framework for understanding the tensions of proximity and distance that define mediation. My central aim is to understand the mechanisms by which torture is both sanctioned and disavowed in American culture, how it functions as a shadow to U.S. concepts of liberal democracy that must deny its existence, and how the U.S. practice of torture is mediated in order to be accepted in American culture. Silverstone's concept of proper distance offers a challenge to engage with the question of mediation not simply as an exercise in how meanings change and disavowal works, but to ask moral questions that strike at the core of how mediation can both uphold regimes of power and resist them.

I am particularly interested in how a mediation of torture is enabled through modes of innocence and comfort culture, modes that are hugely powerful in American culture. American comfort culture is undergirded by the concept of American innocence and a culture of defense. Comfort as a mode to be consumed and a style is a key factor in the disavowal in American society about the nation's current fragile state of being – disavowal about the actual threat Americans live within, economically and politically, and the role U.S. policies and political modes have played in making that threat worse, about the state of insecurity as the norm; and disavowal about the brutal impact of U.S. actions and policies on its own citizens and those of the world. Comfort culture is a mechanism of distancing. That is, it functions primarily to create experiences of proximity while offering comfortable modes of distancing.

This interrelationship of proximity, distance, and mediation is directly related to the question of how nations, and the mediating forms that affirm them, construct our relationship to the other. Silverstone argues for a definition of proper distance that:

refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding. (2007: 47)

That is, he argues for an epistemological and ontological commitment to understanding a relationship to the other. The carefulness with which this formulation defines a potential and idealized mediated relationship to the other is crucial. It may seem perhaps ironic that such a formulation offers a point of departure to understanding how the practice of torture is mediated, given that we can understand torture as proper distance's

opposite. Yet, as I will explore further, this complication of the concept of distance is key to understanding that process of mediation. There are enabling and disabling forms of distance; unpacking them can help us to see how mediation works, how these are not only processes of denial and disavowal but also processes through which relationships are affirmed and constructed.

I see the mediation of torture in U.S. culture in relation to what I have called the ‘tourism of history’ that has characterized American culture throughout most of its history, and in particular in the past few decades (Sturken, 2007). By using the term ‘tourism of history’ I am pointing to the mediating forms through which the American public is encouraged to experience itself and the nation’s relationship to global politics and world history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments, modes that have as their goal a cathartic yet distanced ‘experience’ of history. The tourist is a figure who stands outside of any particular location or history, who peers in while feeling no responsibility for the economic, cultural, and historical impact of tourist activity. It is a *distanced* relationship that offers a sense of closeness and proximity as part of its veneer.

U.S. culture is fundamentally structured in ways that encourage a tourist relationship to history, one that allows Americans to feel distanced from global politics and world events, and to see our role in them as separate and exceptional. This tourist relationship disavows the impact of our often destructive and brutal policies, and maintains an innocence about them. The tourism of history, whether it is manifested in the consumerism of defensive design, in museum reenactments of traumatic events, in the kitschification of grief via 9/11 teddy bears, in the superficial and biased news media coverage of world politics created by the context of 24-hour news cycles, or in the trivialization of torture as a practice of the U.S. government, provides the means for consumer-citizens to feel ‘authentically’ close to traumatic events while also feeling innocent and detached.

The tourism of history that frames American culture allows the U.S. imperial project to be disavowed because it provides an image of the U.S. as an exceptional nation. This kind of imperialism must deny itself; it needs to be shadowed by a culture of comfort and innocence in order to be fully palatable to the American public (Campbell, 1998: 3). Comfort culture sells the idea of emotional connection. At its most extreme, it embodies many forms of kitsch. Yet, it effectively produces not a relation of proximity but one of distance, one aided and mediated by consumerism, media tropes, and narratives of popular culture.

The problem of torture

The national identity of the United States is deeply invested in a moral discourse that involves a denial of its long history of torture. As Jinee Lokaneeta has argued, ‘one of the self-defining features of liberal democracies is the absence of torture or indeed any “unnecessary” state violence’ (2010a: 2). Yet, the recent exposure of the role played by torture in the ‘war on terror’ has revealed not only the recent post-9/11 endorsement of torture by the Bush administration but also brought into public view the longer shadow history of torture in the project of American Empire, in particular the U.S.-sanctioned torture in Latin America from the postwar period into the Reagan era (Klein, 2005, 2007). The mediation of torture as a practice into the liberal democratic self-image of the

United States has been theorized by Giorgio Agamben as a kind of ‘state of exception’ through which the exception becomes the rule (thus, by extension, torture is normalized as a practice in exceptional circumstances and becomes the norm when the war on terror is defined as a state of perpetual war) (Agamben, 2005; Mirzoeff, 2006). Lokaneeta states that this can be seen within the fundamental tension between law and violence in liberal democracies, and that ‘a liberal state in particular has to distance itself from torture precisely because the absence of these acts represents the success of a “progressive narrative” on which those liberal democracies are based’ (2010a).

That the history of the liberal democracy of the United States has been predicated in part on the practice of torture (rather than its absence) creates a set of tensions with the narratives of American identity and exceptionalism. One of the guiding myths of torture that makes it palatable is that it is a means to access important intelligent information, what is known as the ‘ticking bomb scenario’ – that only torture can get the suspect to give up the necessary information to disarm the ticking bomb, a scenario that was deeply affirmed in Bush-era American culture with the highly popular television show *24*. The myth that torture is a practice aimed at acquiring intelligence from the guilty is easily dispelled by an examination of torture’s history throughout the world. Torture is a form of terrorism; it aims primarily to terrorize. To address this question is to expose its primary function within the history of imperialism and war.

Torture for torture’s sake, rather than for information seeking, is more often the norm. In her book *The Dark Side*, Jane Mayer has written, as have other investigators, that the torture at the prison at Guantánamo Bay continued long after it was clear that the vast majority of the detainees had no information and were not jihadists (Mayer, 2007: 183). Anne McClintock asks, ‘what is the motive for torturing people whom the government and interrogators know are innocent?’ She goes further to argue that to ask the question ‘why torture innocent people?’ ‘is to enter a dark labyrinth, a labyrinth of imperial paranoia marked on all sides by flashpoints of violence and atrocity’ (2009: 51). To this question, I would add, how is it that we remain largely *comfortable* with the fact that the United States routinely engages in torture not simply to gain intelligence but *because it can*. Obama’s rescinding of this policy had little public support, and, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the Obama administration has merely ‘repositioned’ torture back to its previous position of the norm, of ‘indifference to its victims’ (Chomsky, 2009). Indeed, the Obama administration is pursuing an aggressive project of secret prisons in Afghanistan, put into motion by its predecessor, prisons that are, like Guantánamo, deliberately situated outside the borders of the United States.

That the practice of torture has historically been not about the seeking of information but about the exercise of power, the brutal dehumanization of people who are within the power of their captors, has long been understood by those who study it. As Allen Feldman has written, the debate about torture’s legality is ultimately about institutionalizing its legal indeterminacy: ‘The terminus of such deniable detention and torture is to render the detainees virtually guilty, sentenced, and judged, to project them as legal specters and as screen memories of a founding terror’ (Feldman, 2009: 1705). The United States is hardly unique in its practice of torturing people who it knows to be innocent. Yet I focus on the U.S. example in part because the knowledge that the U.S. tortures in the name of the nation is both known and disavowed, is mediated, in ways that are quite revealing about how the relationship of morality and national identity is mediated.

Proper distance

Key to both the experience of visual media and to the experience of torture is a paradoxical, if not perverse, relationship of proximity and distance. Torture is a practice that is rarely imaged directly in the media but is rather imagined – as I will discuss further – in media representations and popular culture. A complex unpacking of distance, in both its enabling and disabling forms, allows us to understand how torture is mediated and made comfortable through these images.

For Silverstone, negotiating distance (both necessary and disabling distances) is crucial to the experience of a mediated morality. His concept of proper distance is thus about refining our understanding of the kinds of distance possible within the broader context in which media is understood as bridging distances and providing experiences of mediated closeness. Silverstone argues that:

distance is not just a material, a geographical or even a social category, but it is, by virtue of all these and as a product of their interrelation, a moral category.... We need to be close, but not too close, distant, but not too distant. (2007: 172)

Mediatization produces, Silverstone writes, ‘a kind of polarization in the determinations of such distance. The unfamiliar is either pushed to a point beyond strangeness, beyond humanity; or, it is drawn so close as to become indistinguishable from ourselves’ (2007: 172). Proper distance thus has as its goal a certain level of familiarity that can engage stranger relations, and a rejection of *faux* kinds of proximity that might create an illusion of empathy (which could include, for instance, the kind of prescribed sentiment that constitutes kitsch) when in fact they create little understanding of the other.

Distance, within its ‘proper’ (an admittedly problematic adjective) realm, as defined by Silverstone, is a key aspect of relations within a public, what Michael Warner refers to as ‘stranger relationality’, or the modes of interaction that allow strangers to relate to each other within a public. As Warner notes, ‘Our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so’ (2002: 75). And this public is increasingly defined within the modes of visual media. This takes us, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has written, from the ‘hey you’ of the model of interpellation defined by Louis Althusser to the model of visibility defined by Jacques Rancière. The police don’t address us as ‘hey you!’ any more, writes Rancière, they now say to us, ‘Move along, there is nothing to see’ (1998: 177; see also Mirzoeff, 2006, 2011; Ross, 2002: 23). As Mirzoeff writes:

a key ‘contact zone’ for those wanting to contest empire is now visual culture in its fullest sense, ranging from global visual media like CNN to the Internet and photography. Because when the police say there is nothing to see, we do not believe them – nor are we supposed to. (2006: 23)

The mediation of relations to the other, and of proximity and distance, takes place in the context of visual culture – visibility is a central means through which power is enacted and through which relationality is performed. Thus, we must situate these relations within visual culture and what constitutes visual citizenship. Robert Hariman (2010) argues for a mode of ‘compassionate seeing’, in which he defines compassion as a mode of engagement, distinct from pity, that demands a particular ‘politics of presence’ that

'would depend on seeing, listening, abiding with, and otherwise being in a position to pay attention and be open to an encounter with the other'. Hariman situates compassion in relationship to the mode of indifference, which he argues is at the core of liberalism – 'the indifference at the core of liberalism is there to buffer individual liberty against the pressures exerted by social structures. We begin by leaving each other alone.' Yet the value of indifference (I leave you alone) is mediated by the problems indifference poses for brokering shared interests. Hariman states that 'indifference is a good basis for liberalism but not for democracy', that stranger relationality demands the moral sentiments necessary for ethical judgment and collective action, which are themselves not given but 'rather have to be provided'.

These conceptual workings also make clear the problems of indifference's opposite, that of interestedness – in particular when we see it in relation to the history of empire and colonialism. Practices of empire are interested practices, they cannot be indifferent, they cannot 'leave alone'. In this context, torture as a nationally sanctioned practice is a notably interested practice – it is anything but indifferent. This formulation makes clear why the torture of the known-to-be-innocent person is a key feature of sanctioned torture – it is a practice that marks its interestedness in the other because of their otherness, not because of information they possess. Similarly, as Hariman notes, the 'public arts' of documentary photography, photojournalism, and new media, aim to bridge indifference while structuring relations of compassion, which in his definition demands a reformulation of interestedness through compassionate (rather than pitying) engagement. Images bring closeness of very particular kinds, and in ways that allow for a sense of the trace of the other, of connectivity. Yet, as Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) writes, the capacity of media to bring distant suffering closer to the viewer does not translate into the position of a cosmopolitan viewer.

Such formulations seem to me to expand concepts of proximity and distance in fruitful ways that can provide insights into my particular query about the modes that allow a national public, such as the American public, to be comfortable with the U.S. status as a nation that tortures innocent people despite its avowed identity as a nation that does not do so. The question of torture as a practice of war, terrorism, and dictatorship, and the role of torture in the project of American Empire has been written about extensively (Harbury, 2005; Hardt and Negri, 2000; McCoy, 2006). Here, I am specifically interested in the means through which Americans are rendered *comfortable*, within the modes of the tourism of history, with the practice of torture, and the role of media images and popular culture in that comfort. What are the *mediating forms* through which torture is made palatable to the American public, and how do modes of proximity and distance, of compassion and indifference/interestedness factor in them? What, in other words, are the enabling and disabling relations of distance produced in this mediation of torture, which can take the form of domestication, trivialization, and irony.

The distance of the icon

The mediation of torture has taken place through modes of visibility, much of it in the form of image icons, including, most famously, the image of the hooded man taken at Abu Ghraib prison. One of the key factors in the distance created by images is their

capacity to be rendered iconic. The image that becomes an icon not only is transformed into a stand-in for an event but also, through the very process of iconicity, contains and reduces that event and the subjects imaged within it (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). The icon effect of the figure of the hooded man in Abu Ghraib, standing on a box with his arms outstretched, has been affirmed by its vast circulation and its status as the source of innumerable remakes, from the well-known iRaq poster transforming it into an iPod ad to its juxtaposition with the Statue of Liberty (wearing a Klu Klux Klan hood) on a Baghdad mural by Salaheddin Sallat. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) has argued, the figure of the hooded man reached iconic status because it connects the ‘unspeakable scenarios’ of Abu Ghraib with a familiar set of visual tropes, in particular the martyred figure of Christ on the cross, his arms outstretched in a similarly vulnerable and tortured position.

Yet, in the context of thinking about mediation and distance, we can see the effect of the icon status of this image as providing not simply a summation of the events, but an enabling distance through its iconicity. It’s worth noting that the iconic status of this image (its iconic status is shared with the image of Lynndie England holding a man on a leash) is likely due in part to the difficulty of viewing many of the more graphic Abu Ghraib images; in this image we have no naked bodies piled on each other, rather a figure whose face is masked from our view and whose pose seems orchestrated for dramatic effect (Mirzoeff, 2006). The image of the tortured hooded man, standing on a box with arms beseeching outstretched, is a significantly more palatable image, an almost lyrical one. Its proliferation of remakes makes this clear, the man’s figure is haunting, a dark reminder of brutality yet an image of historical iconographic poses. Its iconicity is not only because of its palatability, but also because of its insertion into a history of images of martyrdom. As Sarah Boxer writes, the image depicts a man already posed on a pedestal, ‘an ad for martyrdom, made in America’ (2004).

The hooded man remains anonymous in the photograph (several survivors of Abu Ghraib have claimed to be this figure, and it is likely that this particular practice of torture was used on more than one prisoner). His insertion into the history of Christian iconography through the image does not provide a means to create a relationship within an ethics of care. That is, the iconic status of the image, which could have been deployed as a means to create outrage at the sanctioned torture of the soldiers at Abu Ghraib, becomes in its decontextualized iconicity abstracted and disconnected from the man in the photo himself (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2008). In the image’s iconic status, it does not matter who he is.

The tortured other thus presents a potentially paradoxical challenge to what it means to regard the other with humanity. Within a framework of proximity and distance, the interrelationship of torture can be seen in some of its practices as one of brutal closeness, in others as brutally distanced (Duras, 1986; Hirsch, 2006). For instance, as torture techniques are developed and refined, sensory deprivation has emerged as a key practice of prison management and high-level torture. A well-known image of the prisoners at Guantánamo Bay shows them kneeling between several metal fences, their hands and feet bound, in what scrutiny reveals is an array of sensory deprivation techniques – ski goggles, ear muffs, mittens, surgical masks – what McClintock calls ‘touchless torture’.

Torture has been theorized as a notoriously difficult experience to describe and represent. As Elaine Scarry famously wrote in her book *The Body in Pain* (1985), there

are few words that succeed in describing human pain at its most extreme, in contexts in which the production of pain (more often than the extraction of information) is the goal. The tortured other has rarely been imaged within the context of documentary photographs – conflicts defined by torture, such as the Algerian War and the Dirty War in Argentina have been imaged to a certain degree after the fact (in remakes, artistic engagements, and memorial contexts), and the torture practiced within them has been rendered visible, so to speak, through testimony. Yet, within the US context, the exposure of the Abu Ghraib images (or, rather, the public circulation of the approximately 200 images that were released of the apparently many thousands that were taken) produced a visual rupture that needed containment – as many have argued, that containment took place through particular tropes of masculinity (explanations of the role of pornography), class (the narrative of the few rogue participants that eclipsed the official policy), and Orientalism, in which the tortured others remained not only marked as guilty and violent but also anonymous and dehumanized – in Judith Butler’s terms, as an ‘ungrievable’ life (2004: 20).

The Abu Ghraib images created outrage throughout the world but little public engagement within the United States. While there was shock, shame, and critique, these responses remained contained with a broader discourse of the ‘war on terror’ that served to justify the actions, to trivialize them (by referring to them as the equivalent of fraternity hazing, as well known right-wing political commentator Rush Limbaugh did), or to see them as aberrations of the nation. As Mirzoeff notes, the images, and what they said about American actions, were remarkably absent from the political debates the same year that they were exposed, and subsequently the Obama administration has attracted little public outrage by refusing to release the rest of the images. As I noted at the outset, Obama’s decision to close the detention center at Guantánamo Bay has received little public support. The closure has not only proved difficult to accomplish for an administration still very much engaged in a project of anti-terror empire, but also because the (illegal) torture at Guantánamo succeeded in created a class of people (formerly innocent, now potential lifetime enemies) for whom ‘indefinite detention’ is now argued to be justified. What are the mechanisms through which that outrage did not emerge more broadly in U.S. society? What is the perceived interestedness (lack of liberal indifference) in the torturing of people known to be innocent? How did photographs, the media, and popular cultural forms within the U.S. help this process of interestedness? The myth of popular understandings of torture is that it takes place in the service of higher national aims (like the prevention of future violence) and that it is a practice aimed at the already-guilty. The capacity of the American public to be comfortable with the fact that the U.S. sanctions the torture of people who are innocent (and thus, by extension, embraces a position that all others are potentially bodies through whom revenge can be sought, through whose torture some kind of power can be reinstated) takes place through a range of contexts that deploy modes of trivialization and irony.

It is important to note that a complex process of defense and military aggression undergird this process. American culture has operated, to varying degrees, as a culture of defense since 9/11 – a culture that has existed for extensive periods of American history yet which has taken hold in particularly powerful ways in the post-9/11 context. The culture of defense, powerfully realized throughout the Cold War, enables an

extraordinary set of sanctions for military activity. Wars are waged, countries across the world are invaded, dictators put into power in countries most U.S. citizens can't find on a world map, and assassinations and torture sanctioned in the name not of American Empire but national defense. The culture of defense thus masks of the project of American Empire in very effective ways. In the culture of defense, the nation must constantly act from a position that erases its actual exposed vulnerability; it must also paradoxically represent itself as *both* powerful and vulnerable – the later is easily seen in the preoccupation (to the point of hysterical consumerism fueled by the news media) on the 2003 eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when Americans stockpiled consumer supplies to defend their own homes, even though it was the citizens of Baghdad who were truly at risk (Sturken, 2007: 72–7).

In this post-9/11 context, in which the memory of the terrorist attacks was spun so easily into wars on two other nations, the culture of defense was manifested as a kind of style of security, one that formed a key aspect of the comfort culture that contained U.S. society. Much of this style is manifested in ways that are predictable within the history of the domestication of militarization: security design within the private home, barrier architecture, the retooling of military gear and hardware into consumer items, the selling of preparedness and defense, from SUVs and Hummers to home defense systems to bullet-proof backpacks for students. Yet, the culture of defense can be manifested in many different modes, including kitsch, trivialization, and irony. I turn now to look at how these modes have enabled a comfort level with the practice of torture, one with shifting relations of proximity and distance.

The security of kitsch and the banality of torture

The detention center of the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, is perhaps the icon of torture in American culture. That the very existence of Guantánamo as detention center did not create more widespread public outrage reveals the disavowal of the centrality of brutality, torture, and unlawful conduct in the pursuance of U.S. policy and American Empire throughout U.S. history. What criticism there was in the initial post-9/11 years was overshadowed by the broad acceptance, sold effectively by the Bush administration and the Pentagon, of the necessity of Guantánamo to national security. This underscores the importance of understanding how its presence has been mediated. What Guantánamo is, and how it exemplifies the dark side of the U.S. 'war on terror' has been the subject of significant discussion over the past few years in policy, political, and academic circles. Guantánamo is, of course, a famously exceptional aberration: it is a U.S. Naval Base on the island of Cuba, yet not within the jurisdiction of Cuba, a site 'owned' by the U.S. through a perpetual lease since 1903 that the Bush administration claimed is outside of U.S. law, a site referred to by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg as 'an animal, there is no other like it'. Yet, contemporary scholars have labored hard to make clear, as the extent of the torture doctrine of the Bush administration has been revealed, that the connection between Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib reveals Guantánamo not as exception but as the central guiding example of a broader policy – that it lies, as Amy Kaplan has written, 'at the heart of American empire' (2006: 240).

The level of ease and comfort of the broader American public with the existence of and justification for Guantánamo has been enabled by the mode of trivialization hand in hand with an aesthetics of hygiene, which is an essential element of the style of security. The domestication of torture that has taken place during the 9/11 period has allowed for the cleaning up of torture, which constitutes a kind of aesthetics of trivialization. The distancing that we can see facilitated by the mediation of Guantánamo in U.S. culture has taken several forms: domestication, trivialization, kitsch, the reenactment/remake, and irony. Many of these modes are about a disavowal of torture, but not all are – in the case of remakes and irony, there is often an aim to use distancing effects (in particular that of irony) to push back at torture's acceptance, to critique the broader American indifference to its implications.

The trivialization of torture is a form of banal disavowal that deploys language to sanitize brutality. This process has a very long history, and in her classic study, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry analyzes the ways in which the most common tools of torture are simple domestic objects, turned by context into weapons of brutality: a room, a table, a door, a bathtub, etc. In Scarry's analysis, torture is 'world destroying', it aims to create an experience of 'world dissolution' for the tortured. She writes:

Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilization, are annihilated: There is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed.... the de-objectifying of the objects, the unmaking of the made, is a process externalizing the way in which the person's pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is here ... (1985: 41)

Thus, to render the torturous domestic is to render torture the norm. The question, how is it that the American public can tolerate the torture taking place in its name, can be answered in part by the systematic aim to render it equivalent to the stresses of everyday life. Jinee Lokaneeta (2010b) writes that this constitutes a kind of sanitation of torture. In the post-9/11 context, this has taken place not only in the realm of right-wing media but also in the discourse of government officials and official government reports. In this process of domestication, the tactic of moving prisoners to different cells every few hours was called the 'frequent flyer program' in an official government report that concluded no torture existed, waterboarding was called a 'dunk in the water' (by Vice-President Dick Cheney), and sleep deprivation was mockingly compared to life on the campaign trail by former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani (Lokaneeta, 2010b: 264). Perhaps the most notorious instances of trivialization come from former secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who famously scribbled on the torture memos that 'I stand 8–10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?' (Sands, 2008: 5).

This trivialization reaches new levels when it takes the form of kitsch. On one hand, the kitschification of Guantánamo fits neatly within the broader fabric of American modes of engagement with difficult histories, since kitsch is a primary mode through which Americans have consumed the memory of national traumas such as 9/11, transforming the experience of grief into the purchase of teddy bears and curios. Nor should the existence of a gift shop at the military base in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, come as a



shock since it houses 7000 personnel and was active before the establishment of the prison as a site outside of American legal jurisdiction. Yet, the kitschification of torture at the gift shop does seem to produce a new and disturbing level of distancing kitsch. To name a few of the items: T-shirts emblazoned with ‘The Taliban Towers: The Caribbean’s Newest 5-Star Resort’ and ‘Greeting from GTMO Resort and Spa’, children’s T-shirts reading ‘future behavior modification expert’, and coffee mugs that say ‘Gitmo Joint Task Force’ and ‘Kisses from Guantanamo’. Cartoonist Matt Bors played off the common trope that all activities end up with a visit to the gift shop by creating a cartoon in which a traumatized Guantánamo detainee is loaded up with souvenirs on his way to his release.

Such souvenirs imply a seamless integration of the activity of torture into the everydayness of domestic life. Thus, the child’s T-shirt implies that its message will integrate without rupture into the daily life of children and the coffee mug implies through its very materiality that its message is easily integrated into a daily routine so that its presence at the breakfast table is not unusual but is, in fact, expected. Domestication is a powerful

and largely undervalued feature of imperial and colonial enterprises. Scholars such as Amy Kaplan (2002) and Kristin Ross (1996) have argued for the key role played by processes of domestication in the pursuit of empire. The trivialization of torture can be seen within the context of hygienics and cleansing. The cleansing role of torture, trenchantly analyzed by Kristin Ross in relation to postwar French culture's relationship to Algeria, takes place within the context of the domestic – the torture of the Algerian War was paralleled by a postwar discourse of hygiene in French society.

What are we to make of the intended humor (and consequent trivialization) at work in the Guantánamo Bay T-shirts? The kitschification of brutal histories is not a new thing, but in this context the T-shirts function in the same way as the now famous torture memos, in their justification of the brutalizing treatment that was the norm at Guantánamo, treatment so brutal that it is now acknowledged by those in government that the torture itself has rendered some of Guantánamo's occupants so destroyed that they cannot be released for fear that their destruction has made them potentially dangerous enemies. The T-shirt reduces the torture to a joke, a joke that both affirms its legitimacy and negates its brutality.

Joking has also been a key feature of the mediation of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in ways that exemplify the deep insidiousness of the distances created by the mode of the tourism of history. Lynndie England, who became famous for posing while holding a prisoner on a leash, and whose acting out in front of the camera held by her then-boyfriend Charles Graner turned her into an icon of banal brutality, has also been the source of a joking phenomenon known as 'doing a Lynndie'. England's other famous picture featured her pointing, with thumbs up to mimic a gun, toward the genitalia of a line of naked, hooded Iraqi prisoners, with a cigarette hanging from her mouth. The jocular and unapologetic pose soon became fodder for a trend, including a website, called 'doing a Lynndie', with photos in which people assume the same pose around an array of trivial and offensive objects, from household pets to half-clothed friends to references to the hooded man. As Kari Anden-Papadopoulos writes, these remakes 'reinforce the entertainment value that (partly) was the intention with the original photographs taken by the American guards at the Iraqi prison'. Yet, she continues, 'it is, after all, a gesture of authoritative power being exercised by the people "Lynndieing" their victims' (2008: 22). Just as the trivialization inherent in the coffee mug and consumer object itself is a form of disabling distancing, the making fun of torture is a means of affirming its legitimacy and its justification. The purchase of the souvenir is an act of justification – torture must be justified if it is at the level of the joke – and the joking reference of the 'Lynndie' gesture is appallingly demeaning, a trivialization of brutality that cannot accept the humanity of the men gestured to in the original photo.

This affirmation through trivialization of dehumanization is directly connected to the broader processes of torture's justification. As I noted before, the fantasy of the justification of torture (a narrative that allows it to be incorporated into the national image of a liberal democracy) is that it is an effective method of acquiring information for national defense, to keep the country safe. The prominence of torture as a plot twist in *24*, a show that began airing just two months after 9/11, had a defining role in the depiction of and debate about torture in the ensuing years (the show ended in May 2010). The ticking bomb was the very essence of the show's plot (each episode being structured as 1 hour

of each series' 24 hours, with a clock showing time running out). It was not only popular and influential, but, in a paradoxical yet also disturbingly revealing turn, it was also, according to Jane Mayer, actually used as a source for particular techniques by personnel engaged in torture at Guantánamo (2007: 196). The Jack Bauer character on *24*, played by Kiefer Sutherland, is depicted as only using torture because nothing else is effective, while his enemies are shown as deploying it indiscriminately. The show thus operates to legitimate torture as necessary to the survival of the nation. As Lokaneeta points out, this plot narrative was enormously popular in the post-9/11 period and when the show decided to play down the torture narrative and its writers grew tired of it, it was not because of the protests of human rights groups but because it began to feel 'trite' – 'the idea of physical coercion or torture is no longer a novelty or surprise' (2010b: 267). The narration of torture is thus normalized in popular culture, a mere trite plot twist, mediating a broader acceptance of its practice.

Reenactment, irony, and the limits of political critique

Parallel to these mediating practices of both justification and trivialization have been modes of engagement such as reenactment and irony that have attempted to move past direct critique to engage with the question of U.S. torture. It's worth remembering that the mode of irony had little traction in the immediate post-9/11 years in American culture, when public debate was significantly stifled and a policing of tone took place both in the media and in popular debate. Forms of cultural reenactment in relation to 9/11 and the war on terror have followed in many ways the expected timeline in which reenactments emerge over time and then gradually move away from conventional, reassuring, and affirming narratives toward narratives that can incorporate ambiguity and critique. Thus we find in the modes of reenactment not only trivialization, recuperation, and redemption, we also find parody, irony, and critique.

As a strategy of engagement with difficult and traumatic contexts, reenactment raises important questions in relation to frameworks of proximity and distance. Reenactment usually aims to create an experience, often one of proximity and affiliation in viewers. Thus, one of the fundamental aspects of reenactments across a broad spectrum of media forms is the belief that they can create empathetic responses through proximity and closeness to an event, from the constructed experience of 'being there' to the visceral experience of a retelling.

Artists, writers, and activists who have attempted to engage with question of the U.S. sanctioning of torture have often deployed reenactment as a means to create empathetic responses and to engage in ironic critique. These interventions raise questions not only about what reenactment creates as an experience but also about the role of irony in political critique. For instance, journalist/commentator Christopher Hitchens underwent an experience of waterboarding (that 'dunk in the water' whose status as torture was hotly contested in the debate about the torture memos), at the hands of American Special Forces specialists (Hitchens, 2008: 70–3). Why do such a journalistic stunt, one might ask, since some of the people who have survived being waterboarded by the U.S. troops and have given testimony of their experiences which has been documented and circulated? Yet, Hitchens and his editors at *Vanity Fair*, which ran the story (including photos

of Hitchens with black-masked specialists standing over him) clearly felt that this kind of first-person scenario by a well-known columnist (rather than an othered survivor) would create empathy in the magazine's readers and would work against disabling forms of distance. Yet, the image of Hitchens undergoing the process for the sake of a magazine column borders on the gratuitous, along with its headline, 'Believe me, It's Torture'.

Irony is not a key mode in Hitchens's attempt to do something new in the torture debate, a certain earnestness is actually at work. But it is the case that many reenactments of post-9/11 torture have attempted to deploy irony and ironic humor to attempt to create what we might see as experiences of proper distance. In other words, these artists and commentators feel that the best way to render visible the experience of torture and incarceration and to expose its brutality, is to reenact it. Artist Steve Powers created a sideshow of Guantánamo at Coney Island in 2008, for which one could pay one dollar. He actually intended to set up an event to waterboard lawyers as a means to inform the legal system about its status as torture, since, as he states, lawyers are some of the people who have the most at stake in exposing it as a practice, but that attempt was unsuccessful. The sideshow advertised itself as a 'thrill ride' with an image of SpongeBob Squarepants saying 'It Don't Gitmo Better' while being waterboarded. When viewers paid their dollar, two animatronic figures, one blindfolded in an orange jumpsuit, enact a scene of waterboarding. The exhibit clearly intends to implicate participants into the national practice of torture, to demand that we feel involved, and the artist's troping off the Coney Island sideshow could be seen as ironic and provocative (he asks, 'What's more obscene, the official position that waterboarding is not torture, or our official position that it's a thrill ride?') (Kaminer, 2008). Yet, the joke of torture as a kind of Coney Island thrill ride also borders, in provocative ways, on trivialization, as one commentator notes:

Brief as it is, this spectacle is so profoundly upsetting, so disturbing, so revolting, that for a second you just want to jump back on the N train and get the hell out of there. But you don't, because as soon as you climb down from the cinderblocks, you find yourself in the exact same place where most Americans end up when they first find out about people being tortured in their name: sure, you're upset, but then you hear the pounding surf and see kids eating cotton candy, and two seconds later you find yourself thinking, 'Yes, that was pretty awful, but I want a lemonade!' (Yaeger, 2008)

The Coney Island setting is both an attempt to break through the tourism of history and a means through which it is also reenacted – the incorporation of the scene of torture into the thrill-filled environment of Coney Island reenacts the ways that torture is absorbed comfortably into the fabric of American culture. Other reenactment forms have attempted to create the means through which experience, in many forms, can create public awareness. One such project is the *Gone Gitmo* project, by journalist/filmmaker Nonny de la Peña and University of Southern California professor Peggy Weil, a creation of a virtual Guantánamo prison in the online world *Second Life*, an interactive three-dimensional virtual world in which users create avatars to live virtual lives online. In *Gone Gitmo*, users can 'experience' Guantánamo through their *Second Life* avatars, experiencing losing their rights, entering into legal black holes, being subject to isolation chambers, etc.¹ The different sites of *Gone Gitmo* include a 'torture contemplation area',

though they stop short of enacting torture on the virtual stand-ins. ‘We are not going to torture your avatar,’ says de la Peña, ‘for a lot of reasons. We don’t want to trivialize the notion of torture’ (Sancton, 2008). Among other things, the Gone Gitmo project attempts to use archive materials and testimony of survivors to create an alternative world that functions as a public forum, and, as Weil states, to create a ‘persistent public space’ that will aggregate the site after Guantánamo is closed.² Yet, de la Peña’s stance makes clear that reenactment is not a viable mode through which the project can maintain its critique, that the mode of reenactment is always vulnerable to the charge that it facilitates too easy a connection. Reenactment often touches too close to the question of comfort.

The Gone Gitmo project aims in important ways to create an experience of the other that would allow for an engagement with the question of U.S.-sanctioned torture. The project aims to use virtual worlds to transcend, in certain ways, the limits of actual worlds. Of course, it is the case that Second Life presents a rarefied world of virtual interaction that is largely unavailable to many constituencies around the world, and so its impact is limited. Nevertheless, this project opens up a space through which the question of mediation is radically posed. Can this kind of mediated experience potentially create an engagement with the comfort culture through which U.S.-sanctioned torture has been absorbed in American culture?

As a mode of engagement, irony can be slippery. On the one hand, it forms a means through which critique can be enacted. Yet, as these examples make clear, irony can also border on trivialization. This brings me to an example that exemplifies the tactic of ironic trivialization at its most, well, trivial. *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo* is a 2008 film that deploys trivialization as a casually progressive tactic, making fun of the ‘war on terror’, the security state (it features a particularly sardonic portrayal of a warrior of the ‘war on terror’ in the form of Rob Coudry as a Homeland Security agent), the paranoia of Americans about security (Harold and Kumar, two famous stoners, one Asian and one South Asian, get arrested and sent to Guantánamo after Kumar lights up a bong – sounds like ‘bomb’ – in the bathroom of a transatlantic flight). The film, like its predecessor *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004), inflects the stoner genre with a race-conscious and politically progressive, anti-authoritarian critique.³ The film is at one level a trenchant critique of the war on terror and the hysterical paranoia of U.S. society in the post-9/11 era, a satiric engagement with the project of American Empire. Yet there is simply no avoiding the fact that the film trivializes the experience of Guantánamo, which our ‘heroes’ are able to escape with little trouble, and where the torture they are subjected to consists of a near-miss from sexually servicing a very large prison guard. As Amnesty International commented on the film, Guantánamo is not a joke. And this raises an important problem about the deployment of irony and the distancing effects it engenders. The film makes clear the legal farce that constitutes Guantánamo. The problem is that the exposure of this farce has the effect of making the prison itself, and the torture that took place there, a source of humor.

Irony can function powerfully as a source of critique, yet its distancing can operate both as a means to unpack and analyze and as an affective distance. The challenge is to consider what the middle terrain is, between proximity (in its actual and *faux* forms) and distance, and between enabling and disabling aspects of distance. As Silverstone makes

clear, distance is not simply geographical or material but a moral category. A concern with the capacity of media to create 'improper' or 'spurious' closeness motivates his formulation of proper distance (Silverstone, 2007: 172). Irony functions as a counterpoint to the easy sense of closeness that comes from kitsch forms, yet its distance can also spill easily into a distance that is devoid of empathy. Such are the paradoxes and dilemmas that circulate through these experiences of mediation and othering.

Distance and vulnerability

Judith Butler has written poignantly about the role that vulnerability plays in the context of a potential global understanding. In a culture of defense, one that produces not only the barricaded homes and vengeful wars but also the glib yet incisive humor of *Harold & Kumar*, the question is ultimately raised about what constitutes the 'we' in whose name the actions are taken, the torture pursued, the bodies unmourned. For, while I began by arguing that liberal democracies define themselves as nations that do not torture, and that they need to mask and mediate their torture practices, it is increasingly the case that torture is affirmed in U.S. culture, not simply within the myth of the ticking bomb scenario but as a right of an empowered nation. An acceptance of torture as a sanctioned practice of the nation follows from this position of vulnerability and perceived need for revenge – the torture of innocent people in the name of the nation is enabled by the sense, articulated by former interrogator Tony Lagouranis, that 'they should be made to feel the same pain that we felt and America, the mightiest power in history, should be able to dominate this enemy utterly and tyrannically'. Since the U.S. was so unable to assert such a level of domination on the ground, in Iraq, Afghanistan, or in relation to Al Qaeda, it asserts it within the prison context with the full sanction of the U.S. public. Lagouranis writes, 'Who are we? We are a nation that overwhelmingly supports torture. That is what we want' (Lagouranis and Mikaelian, 2007: 247–8).

Vulnerability is crucial to this dynamic and to the possibility of resisting it. Butler writes

Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*? ... Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all.... [E]ach of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability ... (2004: 20)

Vulnerability, Butler argues, and the capacity to be vulnerable to grief, are crucial factors in resituating global politics. In other words, if we can understand the position of vulnerability and, 'tarry' with grief, then we can dislodge the culture of defense and its mediation. She writes:

If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another? Could the experience of a dislocation of First World safety not condition the insight into the radically inequitable ways that corporeal vulnerability is distributed globally? (2004: 30)

Butler's question is profound, and brings me back to the role of comfort culture. The position of vulnerability is an *uncomfortable* one, one that has been mediated in post-9/11 American culture through a particular kind of culture of defense and comfort kitsch. What would it mean, in her terms, to tarry with vulnerability, to let its full implications emerge without a response. Vulnerability demands trust, and, as Silverstone writes, 'trust is a way of managing, that is reducing, distance' (2007: 123). His formulations of proper distance create a framework for understanding how comfort and discomfort are constructed through relations of proximity and distance – from the *faux* closeness of kitsch and tourism to the challenging closeness of empathy and vulnerability, from the disabling distance of invulnerability to the proper distance that allows for an ethics of care and a sense of responsibility. As he writes, 'we need, perhaps, to demand a modicum of discomfort, a willingness to be troubled' (2007: 135). His work demands that we ask how the forms that mediate our experiences can be deployed in ways that allow us to feel our shared vulnerability with the other? Silverstone's concept is, in ways that seem almost poignant, one of utopian ambition. How can we create contexts of proper distance, in which vulnerability would find its place in order to create new mediated relations to the other? This is, finally, one of the most important questions of our times.

Note

- 1 See: <http://gonegitmo.blogspot.com>.
- 2 See: http://fora.tv/2009/05/04/Animating_Human_Rights_Games_Animation_and_Multimedia#
- 3 I am indebted in this analysis to a discussion with Lauren Berlant.

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