CONVERGING WAR
CONVERGENCE CULTURE, THE IRAQ WAR
AND THE HEGEMONY OF THE VISUAL

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The pictures only show you a fraction of a second. You don’t see forward. You don’t see backward. You don’t see outside the frame.

*Standard Operating Procedure* (12:46)

These are the words of Javel Davis, one of the prison guards involved in the Abu Ghraib prison torture practices in Iraq 2003. Two thousand photographs were taken by American soldiers in the prison. Causing great media upheaval after their circulation on the internet and in the press, they evoked an image of an America that captures, not liberates, that tortures, not heals. Today, after the televised death of Saddam Hussein and with the white coffins covered with the American flag fresh on our retinas, the question arises in what ways visual culture contributed to the collective image of the war in Iraq. Films, documentaries and TV series such as *The Hurt Locker*, *Standard Operating Procedure* and *Generation Kill* show how institutionalized media deal with and add to this image.

Being one of the most personally documented wars in history, the second Iraq War is “lived” and experienced on a national level. Unlike the Vietnam War, the first televised military conflict, the Iraq War—through modern technologies such as digital cameras and the internet—has been instantaneously and microscopically transmitted in the homes of Americans (and world citizens alike). This proliferation of personal visual documentation—of which the Abu Ghraib pictures are a vividly morbid example—haunts the American personal and public spheres and seems likely to constitute a significant part of the national memory of the present era.

The field of visual culture and its connection to personal and national remembrance of war finds its roots in theories of representation, mediation, ideology and discourse. Therefore, much of the theoretical framework of this project will be derived from the work of theorists in the field of cultural studies. Summarizing the cultural
studies’ perspective on visual culture, Sturken and Cartwright claim that “meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulate among viewers” (7). They continue their argument by treating the understanding of the material world as always already a mediated process of representation: “the material world only has meaning, and only can be ‘seen’ by us, through these systems of representation. This means that the world is not simply reflected back to us through systems of representations, but that we actually construct the meaning of the material world through these systems” (13). Following John Berger’s influential theory in *Ways of Seeing*, they write: “images have been used to represent, make meaning of, and convey various sentiments about nature, society, and culture as well as to represent imaginary worlds and abstract concepts” (Ibid.).

The example of the Abu Ghraib pictures shows how personal images—visual documentation—and the discourse and debate enabled by them are being used to constitute a national awareness and remembrance of the war. This is only possible in a society in which technologies of information are omnipresent and available to the masses. The links between the personal and the political, or experience and consciousness have never been more immediate. The Abu Ghraib photographs eminently demonstrate how first amorality and next guilt on the personal level became analogous to the national awareness and remembrance of the war. This operates on a discursive level: our knowledge of the Iraq War is mostly mediated to us via visual culture. Consequently, the (visual) discourse about the Iraq War enables us to talk about it (even though it is so far

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1 In this context Stuart Hall adds: “meaning depends on the relationships between things in the world—people, objects and events, real or fictional—and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representations of them” (Hall, *Representation* 18). Language, as a system of representation, is necessary in order to correlate our concepts/ideas with words, images, and sounds. Thus we are inevitably caught in a web of signs, which constitutes the way we “see” and experience the world (Ibid. 27).
removed from us), yet it also limits our view of it. Added to that, the way images are brought to the public—i.e. what medium is used—conveys meaning in itself. The blogs of soldiers are situated at the margins of public interest, while the re-mediated products and “hijacked” images, such as those of Abu Ghraib, of their experience are at the center. This is the reason why different types of visual media should be studied. This research project shows how certain images become dominant in public memory, while others are forgotten—which in itself is a vital part of remembrance. Hence, the politics of national memory are studied.

These questions adhere to a theory of discursive formation, which sustains (and establishes) a regime of truth. Hall writes that “knowledge, linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but also has the power to make itself true” (Ibid. 49). Images—as being part of a discursive system of representation—contribute to what subjects hold as true and false. Michel Foucault states in *Power/Knowledge*:

> Truth isn’t outside power . . . Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, it’s ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned . . . the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

What is photographed, filmed, written, said, or otherwise produced, concerning, for example, the war in Iraq, is made possible, but is also limited by types of discourse. The ways the war is represented in images, but also the ways subjects interpret these images is enabled and restricted by the current system of Power/Knowledge.

Within this “regime of truth,” another pivotal concept gradually rooted itself. Convergence has become somewhat of a “buzzword,” but since the 1980s it has shaped
academic and professional discourses in several fields, ranging from business to journalism (Gordon 57-60). Especially in the field of (mass) communication, along with the integration of the internet, “historically separated modes of communication” have merged (Pool 27). This has affected the production, dissemination, and consumption of media texts. Rich Gordon traces five meanings of convergence concerning media organizations that influence these phases: ownership, tactics, structure, information gathering and presentation (storytelling) (Gordon 63-71). These meanings can be read in a broader, cultural context: Convergence culture allows professionals and non-professionals alike to produce content that is spread through several media in multimedia forms. These productions are then read, heard, and seen by consumers who are, simultaneously, (critical) producers and therefore owners themselves. The implications of convergence culture for media texts concerning the topic of 21st century war are great, as will be made clear in the following chapters.

On the level of interpretation or connotation of an image, especially photographs, semiologist Roland Barthes introduced the concept of “myth” to refer to the cultural values and beliefs that inevitably emerge when looking at a pictorial representation. Barnard defines the concepts of denotation and connotation, flowing out of the work of Barthes: “Denotation is the kind of meaning understood when shapes, lines, colors, and textures are understood as representing things in the world . . . Connotation is often explained as the thoughts, feelings, and associations that accompany one’s perception of an example of visual culture” (149). Barthes argues that a “cultural knowledge” is needed to decode a message, image or sign (Barthes “Rhetoric” 35). Sturken and Cartwright write that “for Barthes, myth is the hidden set of rules and conventions through which
meanings, which are in reality specific to certain groups, are made to seem universal and
given for a whole society” (19). Much like ideology and hegemony “myth thus allows the
connotative meaning of a particular thing or image to be denotative, hence literal or
natural,” or, in Foucault’s sense, true (Ibid.). Images—and their constructed meanings—are produced within the dynamics of social power and ideology. They, and other representations, “are some of the forms through which we persuade others to share certain views or not, to hold certain values or not” (Sturken and Cartwright 21).

People can have several readings of a text, due to their subjective meaning-making process. “Meanings are created in part when, where, and by whom images are consumed, and not only when, where, and by whom they are produced” (Sturken and Cartwright 46). Stuart Hall argues that consumers of a text can follow dominant hegemonic paths of reading a text, but are also able to negotiate with it. Negotiation, working on the analytical level, allows readings connected to different subjectivities and identities. Barthes asserts that images are “polysemous,” that is, “[t]hey imply, underlying their signifiers, a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds.” The reader is able to choose between these and ignore others, but is also constrained. “Hence, in every society various techniques are developed to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes, “Rhetoric” 37). Consumers of visual culture are often directed in their interpretations of a certain message. Advertisement does this with text, film with protagonists with whom many can identify, and documentary with eye-witnesses.

In the following chapters, I will argue that the personal experience of trauma, paranoia, guilt, suffering and death connected to the Iraq War has been mediated and
represented mostly through techniques of visual culture. Television, film and the internet enabled images to be transmitted instantaneously (or only slightly belatedly) into the private and public spheres of Americans and the rest of the world. This added to and enabled a discourse in these terms—trauma, paranoia, guilt, suffering and death—to emerge. Consequently, this gives rise to a national consciousness and memory of the war that is inevitably connected to the visibility of these terms, strengthening their impact.

Expressed in the “vernacular” photography of soldiers, documentaries, films and series such as *Standard Operating Procedure*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Generation Kill*, this self-image challenges hegemonic codes and is therefore detrimental to American cultural domination on a national and global level.

In the first chapter I will focus my research on the representation of the torture practices by American soldiers in The Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad and the creation of trauma in the public mind. I will do so by analyzing the documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* and the pictures themselves, using Roland Barthes’s theories on photography and scholarship derived from them. In the second chapter, I will look at the experience of war expressed in amateur and soldier photojournalism, published on the internet and other new media. The military weblog (milblog in short) will be central to this chapter, since this online medium fully matured during the war; was widely used by soldiers; and it links the personal and the public. In the third chapter, I will evaluate the way institutionalized media frame the war in the film *The Hurt Locker* and the TV-series *Generation Kill*. I will analyze their filmic content, social and cultural context and the ways in which they contribute to the notion of national remembrance of the war. These films especially attempt to cope with personal trauma. The focus of my research will be
on the representation—or, the creation of meaning—of the Iraq War through these photographs and films and the way in which personal stories and images translate into public consciousness and memory. Finally, I am interested in the re-mediation of the war, or how the specificities of each of the visual media represented in this introduction generate their meanings.²

² Current research within the fields of cultural studies, visual culture and cultural memory is in line with the thoughts expressed above. It studies the authority of “photographic truth” and the processes of remembering and image-making through examples of visual culture. In Watching Babylon, Nicholas Mirzoeff recognizes the immense body of visual images created in Iraq and the scale on which the Iraq War was watched. He writes: “there is a need to engage in some extended visual thinking about what all that watching meant” (12). This project shares Mirzoeff’s interest in the production and watching of images of the Iraq War through several media. A second trend Mirzoeff investigates is what he calls “vernacular” photography. American soldiers added to the proliferation of imagery surrounding the war and visualize the experience of war, contributing to a national experience of it. These personal pictures find a platform on these soldier’s blogs and personal network pages and have the potential to be noticed by mainstream media. This (alternative type of) photojournalism is also studied in the research of several other scholars on the topic including John Taylor, Johanna Neuman, Julianne Hickerson, Barbie Zelizer, Fred Parrish, Elizabeth Anne Stanko, Frank Hoy, Alissa Quart and Philip Knightley.
Chapter 1: Mediating Torture & Painful Politics

Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts. No anchor, no cable, no fences avail to keep a fact a fact. Babylon, Troy, Tyre, Palestine, and even early Rome are already passing into fiction. The Garden of Eden, the sun standing still in Gideon, is poetry thenceforward to all nations. Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven, an immortal sign.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” (240)

On the twenty-eighth of April, 2004, a CBS news report in 60 Minutes II stated that American Military Police and Army Reservists had been torturing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib Prison near Baghdad, Iraq. A couple of days later, Seymour Hersh, staff writer for the New Yorker Magazine, published an article online about the atrocities at Saddam Hussein’s old prison, now reinstalled by the American troops as a site for the interrogation of thousands of possible enemies of the coalition forces. Hersh obtained a fifty-three-page report written by Major General Antonio M. Taguba. The report, completed in February 2004, “found that between October and December of 2003 there were numerous instances of “sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses” at Abu Ghraib” (Hersh 1). The media event this leaked report—which was not meant for the general public—initiated was gargantuan. The pictures—some of them shown in 60 Minutes II—caused the greatest upheaval concerning criminal acts by the US Army since My Lai. Because of their “extremely sensitive nature” (qtd. in Hersh 1) the Taguba report did not include the photographs.

Hersh touches upon a sensitive subject when he states: “[a]s the photographs from Abu Ghraib make clear, these detentions have had enormous consequences: for the imprisoned civilian Iraqis, many of whom had nothing to do with the growing insurgency; for the integrity of the Army; and for the United States’ reputation in the
world” (4). The pictures indeed invite different perspectives, personal and (inter)national, but also, on a more theoretical level, that is, the way in which these personal pictures—meant as jokes?—transmit and transform their meanings to the public and the political, and the way they contributed to an experience and memory of the war. Nicholas Mirzoeff claims that “[t]here are, one might say, three intersected layers to be prised apart in visual events . . . These are the locality of the viewer, the content and context of the image, and the global imaginary within which the viewer attempts to make sense of the screen-images” (Mirzoeff 12). The Abu Ghraib pictures are not accompanied by linguistic texts. Therefore they are, following Barthes, highly “polysemic,” meaning that many interpretations are possible. The photographs do not have any accompanying “relay,” or linguistic message that explains, develops, and expands the significance of the image (Barthes “Rhetoric”). Added to this multi-perceptual aspect, Victor Burgin points to the dangerously mesmerizing quality a photograph can have. He warns us that “[w]e need to treat the photographic image as an occasion for skepticism and questioning—not a source of hypnosis” (Burgin 48).

Hence, this chapter will evaluate, to borrow from John Berger, “ways of seeing.” How are meanings created through the Abu Ghraib pictures? This is one of the central issues around which this chapter revolves. Do these pictures just show defunct soldiers in a combat zone, pressed to extreme acts of unnecessary violence? Do they tell a story that can be linked to an international trend of domination and torture toward that which is other? Or, in Barthes’s terms, do these pictures in essence have “nothing to say” and is all the knowledge and judgment brought to these photographs a product of cultural subjectivity? I will first demonstrate that the photographs display a rhetoric of domination
and subjugation on a personal level, in terms of captors and captives and within the US Military itself. Second, I will argue that this rhetoric on the personal level can be interpreted (symbolically) on an international level, meaning the dominating stance of the West toward the East, and to that which is other. Third, I will attempt to show how in the process of their production and mediation the pictures are a product of and contribute to a penal discourse that intrinsically links the personal and the public. This, in its turn, leads to an experience and memory of the war that can be interpreted in these terms.

The Personal Frame

Brent Pack, a military investigator who researched the legality of the practices shown in the Abu Ghraib pictures, states in Errol Morris’s documentary *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) that thousands of pictures, twelve CDs in total, depicted prisoner abuse. In his investigation he put all the photographs, taken with different cameras from different angles, in a timeline to document which soldiers were present, what crimes were committed, how much effort the soldiers put in to what they were doing, and who took the pictures. Pack’s job was to unveil the “metadata” behind the photographs. Every digital picture, he explains, carries with it a wide range of data about itself; it shows when the picture was taken, and by what type of camera. Thus he was able to reconstruct by whose cameras the pictures were taken and how they related to other pictures produced by other cameras. He comments: “The pictures spoke a thousand words but unless you know what they in time were talking about you wouldn’t know the story [sic]” (16:23). Pack next touches upon what counts as fact within what is depicted and what, possibly, is fiction: “When you look at this case as being one great big media event, you kinda loose focus. These pictures actually depict several separate incidents of possible abuse or
possible standard operating procedure. All you can do is present what you know to be factual. You can’t bring in emotion or politics into the court” (17:23).

The military investigator clearly points at the power of pictures in the court as traces of reality. What is seen in them was absolutely there, and the action definitely took place, especially when a time-sketch can be drawn by using the images taken by several cameras. However, this “truth-effect” can be problematic. In court, the focus of the pictures is much on the denotative value of the scene: a descriptive approach to what is seen counts as fact. The aim of Standard Operating Procedure is to show the connotative value—or the stories behind the photographs. As Roman Krol, military intelligence interrogator, points out: “the frustration level was really high” because of the constant mortaring of the prison (31:06). Consequently, the meaning of the pictures alters: instead of healthy US soldiers, we see mentally ill people expressing their frustration through molesting their prisoners. Simultaneously, a power play is occurring within the army. This is not visible in the pictures. Lynndie England and Megan Ambuhl Graner repeatedly tell in Standard Operating Procedure that they were dominated by their male superiors and hierarchically forced to pose in certain ways in the pictures showing torture or sexual subordination. Of course, these personal stories do not change the fact that female and stressed-out soldiers engaged in obvious torture. However, they do serve as a discursive and linguistic framework, or “relay,” that keeps us from being hypnotized by the photographs themselves and immediately condemning the denotative meaning due to a lack of knowledge of, or guide to the pictures.

Personal narratives behind the photographs become important in the discussion of the depictions as traces of an external reality. This question of “truth” and reality is
repeatedly posed in Morris’s film. In an extensive critique, Caetlin Benson-Allott claims that the documentary “is as much about digital ontology as it is about (photographed) detainee abuse. The film leaves its viewer uncertain about the images’ ability to reveal unmediated truths precisely because Morris wants to investigate how others manipulate our belief they could [sic]” (Benson-Allott 1). She holds that the documentary “thus positions its viewer to regard the Abu Ghraib photographs as multivalent fragments that occasion multiple stories rather than telling the whole story” (2). In the chapter “The Image World,” Susan Sontag underscores this complication: the trace, as a fragment, is “something directly stenciled off the real” (80). However, in the analysis of these “footprints” or “death masks,” as Sontag calls traces, personal narratives should be read alongside the grand narrative, because the image on its own has nothing to say. Sontag complicates this even further: “The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing” (82). This notion of power and control in the production, dissemination, and consumption of the image is pivotal in the discussion of the Abu Ghraib pictures.

When discussing the factual representation of events in the pictures in the courtroom, events that occurred outside the pictures did not happen. One of the interviewees in Morris’s film underscores the legal photographic proof the pictures have: “you can’t deny it,” he states when asked whether or not the atrocities truly occurred (12:37). The notorious picture of Lynndie England holding a leash connected to a prisoner lying on the floor—which widely circulated in the media—only shows England,
while in the original, un-cropped photo Ambuhl Graner is seen standing in the shadows to the left. The photographers of the pictures taken at Abu Ghraib can be seen as extreme manipulators of the photographic scene, especially when higher-ranked officers commanded their subordinates to pose in a certain way, or force prisoners to do so.³

In another gruesome picture, Sabrina Harman, one of the US soldiers involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal, poses next to the body of a deceased prisoner. She is smiling and gives a thumbs up. When Morris, in his documentary, implicates to Harman that this picture got her in trouble, she responds by saying that she never knows what to do with her hands and that, conventionally, one smiles in a picture. Benson-Allott points to the question of intentionality when she states that no one knows exactly why the pictures were taken, or what the soldiers in them were thinking (3). In her concise Lacanian approach to the pictures, Rosalind Morris claims that “the torture is a kind of self-sufficiency, it is satisfying in itself, or at least it will come to appear to have been satisfying in the moment when the photographs are viewed” (124). The spectator, in her sense, becomes the producer of what later will be enjoyed. In this the viewer is unable to become critical of her or his actions. Slavoj Žižek poses the question: “why . . . is the observer passive and impotent? Because his desire is split, divided between fascination with enjoyment and repulsion at it” (75).

More is at hand than the pictures—on a denotative level—show. Harman, who is openly homosexual, expresses a feeling of confusion and fear in her letters to her girlfriend. Morris repeatedly shows passages from the letter to the viewer, establishing a feeling of insight into Harman’s psyche. He does not probe Harman for an answer to the

³ Victor Burgin underscores that “in photography, certain physical materials are technically handled so that meanings are produced. Photographers are people who manipulate the physical means of production of photography: cameras, film, lighting, objects, people” (Burgin 41).
question whether or not her sexuality played a role in her status within the group, but what is known is that Charles Graner and Ivan Frederick—the owners of the cameras with which most of the pictures were taken—were considered dominant and sexist and used their positions as higher-ranked sergeants to force others into situations they did not want to be. Morris recalls a conversation he had with Paul Ekman, an expert on the analysis of facial expressions. Ekman’s conclusion was that Harman does not wear a smile stemming from genuine mirth, but rather gives a so-called “social smile.” The consequence of this smile was that Harman spent a year in prison, while the CIA interrogator was not prosecuted (Feinstein 3-4). Even if this were known at the time of the prosecution, Harman’s smile would still have gotten her into prison: “you can read emotion on their face and things in their eyes. But they’re nothing that can be entered in the fact. All you can do is report what’s in the picture,” says Brent Pack (17:25).

Soldiers who were there got blamed, while for the higher-ranked officers there were practically no consequences. Morris, in his end-credits, writes “no one above the rank of Staff Sergeant has served time in prison for the abuse at Abu Ghraib.” This reveals the mechanisms of power and control that influence the reading of images as absolute reflections of truth. This is not to say that the men and women who committed these atrocities should not be punished for their deeds. Justly, “Charles Graner is currently serving a ten year sentence in prison . . . Ivan ‘chip’ Frederick was sentenced to eight years in prison and was paroled in October 2007” (1:48:54). Although, as Morris shows in his film, “the abuse at Abu Ghraib is undeniably terrible and true, the

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4 Errol Morris, in an interview, comments on the Harman case: “You look at the photographs and you see the perpetrators, and you think: they are the perpetrators. What about all those people that aren’t in the frame? You don’t really understand the meaning of the photograph itself. That’s something else altogether, as in Sabrina Harman’s smile as she poses over al-Jamadi’s corpse. She had nothing to do with the Iraqi man’s death in the shower room. A CIA operative killed him. Kill the messenger. Blame the ‘bad apples’, but don’t blame the people who are responsible” (Feinstein 2).
photographs neither speak directly to us nor offer transparent access to the events. The photographs are insufficient and require interpretation from viewers, who may bring external impressions and motivations to the task” (Benson-Allott 3). Here, it is necessary to delve deeper into what these external impressions and motivations are.

**The (Inter)National Picture**

The revived use of Abu Ghraib, Saddam’s former prison and torture center, displays the most cynical form of neo-colonial reason, when the only remaining justification for the invasion was to close the torture rooms.

Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon* (180)

The internet has democratized classified pictures on a global scale, and the instantaneous aspect of the network contributed to a stream of images that can be interpreted, discussed and appropriated anywhere, anytime. Added to that, the proliferation of live-stream images within the homes of many around the world on televisions contributed to a sense of the image’s omnipresence in industrialized parts of global society.⁵ The effect of the Abu Ghraib pictures is therefore palpable in this context. World citizens could see American soldiers torturing prisoners in the very same prison Saddam committed his crimes against humanity. American leaders had to take responsibility in a world that was watching. Hersh writes:

As the international furor grew, senior military officers, and President Bush, insisted that the actions of a few did not reflect the conduct of the military as a whole. Taguba’s report, however, amounts to an unsparing study of collective wrongdoing and the failure of Army leadership at the highest levels. The picture he draws of Abu Ghraib is one in which Army regulations and the Geneva conventions were routinely violated, and in which much of the day-to-day management of the prisoners was abdicated to Army military-intelligence units.

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⁵ Close to a billion people watched the photograph of the man—dubbed Gilligan by the military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison—standing on the box with wires in his hands. This is what Errol Morris claimed in a discussion of his documentary in 2008 on foratv.com. Google provides 175.000 search results in its image-database showing several different versions of the torture pictures in 0.05 seconds.
and civilian contract employees. Interrogating prisoners and getting intelligence, including by intimidation and torture, was the priority. (4)

Here, a discrepancy is visible between the reality of the pictures and the image the American government wanted to paint of the situation at the prison, which was a positive one: containment of potentially dangerous terrorists was necessary and ethically right.

The public relations machine of the Bush administration had carefully targeted the images of the war. Hand in hand with technological changes in the military, these images were aimed with a specific goal: to depict a clean war. Mirzoeff claims:

It is . . . not surprising that the intense pace of change in visual technologies during the 1990s, produced in part by military research, also generated a militarized form of the image. Consequently, the images of the war were not indiscriminate explosions of visuality but rather carefully and precisely targeted tools. There was no single agent of this design, although it was clear that a coordinated media campaign was planned and enacted by the US military and its allies. (73)

Indeed, as early as October 2001 White House advisers had already met with several producers, directors and executives discussing how Hollywood and the entertainment industry could best serve the war effort (Der Derian 28). Thus, the Abu Ghraib pictures were disastrous for the image of the military and the US in general. Mirzoeff continues, that “so many images were being created that there was never time to pause and discuss any one in particular . . . The war-cam represented a conflict in which Iraqi death and suffering took place out of shot” (74-75). However, the Abu Ghraib pictures—and four of them in particular: the leashed prisoner, the wired man, the dead prisoner, and the pyramid of men—froze time and in all the plenitude of imagery appeared a moment of genuine shock that caused deliberation. To a certain extent, Mirzoeff is right in claiming that, on the one hand, in its plenitude, the image becomes information and thus “it loses
the associations of remembrance and becomes nothing more than a tool of war” (76). The images of Abu Ghraib, on the other hand, disrupted this visual flood.

The Bush administration attempted to trivialize the emergence of the photographs and to silence critical sounds in the media, describing the soldiers in the pictures as “bad apples” (Feinstein 3). Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense, reacted to the photographs, unaware of the depth of his statement: “In the information age, people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon” (qtd. in Roberts 53). James Der Derian, in his essay “Imaging Terror,” notes that the Abu Ghraib pictures, after being identified as authentic, took on a single meaning: “a crisis for the Bush administration and the USA’s reputation to the world” (33). The pictures took on a life of their own, cascading into a stream of old and new accusations toward the government.6 Just as the pictures on a personal level prove that the soldiers in them committed the crimes, the photographs also gave evidence of the United States engaging in practices of torture. The authentic picture has gained value in a world in which the image can so easily be manipulated. Also, in Der Derian’s view, this search for authenticity reveals “a deeper desire for a lost moral certainty, in which the public representation of reality becomes a function of a collective struggle for ethical superiority, of a kind that initially justified the US intervention in Iraq and that ultimately provides the twisted rationale of the torturer” (34). The evidential character of pictures can harm the age-old myth of America being a “city upon a hill,” basking in the light of morality and civility.

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6 Indeed, these pictures are unbelievable—certainly in an age of Photoshop—however once established as genuinely “true” the authenticity of the photograph has a greater power than that of its representation (Barthes Camera Lucida 89).
Through this visibility of negativity, America’s imagined community is harmed. Michelle Brown argues that a hyper-aggressive patriotism (shown in the pictures) stands at the root of this detrimental effect. The “patriotic delight” on the soldiers’ faces added to the “shock value” of the photographs (973). Dora Apel also recognizes this, calling the subjugation of others a “corollary to American nationalist pride” (96). Slavoj Žižek, cynical as ever, even dares to say that the pictures give an “insight into American values” (qtd. in Brown 973). Brown introduces the American Abu Ghraib prison and the photographs as primary research sites. She shares the view of Amy Kaplan, who calls the type of prison at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib future detainee colonies, which will become the norm rather than the anomaly. These prisons float in between domestic and foreign, in terms of space and ethical grounds. They are “mobile, ambiguous spaces,” just like the term torture is a dynamic and indefinite term in the Western word. They constitute an “anarchy of empire” (975-976). Brown means by this that due to imperial expansion—as shown in the Iraq War—these spaces are cast in “jarring proximity” to each other (ibid.). When looking at the picture of the pyramid of people her view is illustrated: the thumbs up in this situation is unheimlich, as will be discussed in the next section.

The Personal, the Public, the Political

This war in Iraq, like Vietnam, will probably get remembered as the one time we were not the heroes. We’re not the saviors. And these photographs, they play a big part in that.

Standard Operating Procedure (1:35:30)
Torture, even though it is aimed at the individual body, is never isolated from external implications for a national body: “Through the torture victim, the aim is to reach the group to which the victim belongs . . . It is the collective dimension of the individual that is attacked, the attachment to a group” (Sironi and Branche 539-40). If it is held that no one is placed outside culture, this statement has vast implications for the manner in which the Abu Ghraib pictures should be read. The personal can never be read outside the political and vice versa. Therefore a reading which combines both spheres is necessary. The pictures depict a fusion of “personal power” and “national triumph” (Green et al. 179). The Abu Ghraib events and visual representation invite a reading that combines the personal, national, and international in terms of political effect and affect. The interaction between these bodies in which and by which meaning is created has never been more alive, since, via the internet and other forms of intimate media, a subject is often part of a larger body in which meaning is conveyed. This connection blurs the lines between personal (or lived) and constructed (or artificial) experience.

Michelle Brown recognizes two conventional readings of the pictures and adds her own. First, there is the “bad apples theory” wielded by the Bush administration, which attributed the torture practices to a few—read negatively exceptional—defunct soldiers. This view places the abusers outside the US, both culturally and legally: “much like prisons” the actors are “in” the nation, but not “of” the nation (977). This perspective enables an easy and convenient way of thinking: what happened at Abu Ghraib is exceptional and has nothing to do with structural problems. Again, Donald Rumsfeld provides a telling response that illustrates this:

There certainly is no excuse for anyone in the armed forces to behave the way these photographs indicate some individuals behaved . . . No human being,
regardless of their training or anything else, would engage in those kinds of acts in a normal, acceptable way. They’re, it’s unacceptable. (“Secretary Rumsfeld”)

Indeed, a moral response to these obviously transparent pictures would be to condemn them. There is, seemingly, no question about the amorality of the soldiers depicted in the photographs: “at times we may feel compelled to negate the enigmas of the photograph, feel morally obliged to recognize and assert the transparency of an image, and this compulsion is particularly strong when dealing with images of atrocity” (Beckman 124).

Brown sharply comments that:

Across rhetoric, reports, ‘torture memos,’ and recently released Department of Defense files, the legal architecture of the war on terror is visible only in an elusive language that makes border zones like Abu Ghraib not simply susceptible to human rights violations, but renders dramatic dislocations of cultural responsibility acceptable. (977)

Especially the last point made by Brown is important. The dislocation of responsibility is also clear in the second legal reading of the events at Abu Ghraib which relies on the “obedience to authority” explanation. The formal and social hierarchies within the army and, more specifically, the 372nd military battalion, can—erroneously—explain why torture occurred and why the soldiers posed in the ways they did.

The two legally conventional frames are criticized by Brown because they limit a broader, cultural reading. They “limit discussions of the origins of violence and the cultural conditions necessary for extreme primitiveness, such as torture, in democratic contexts” (979). Both views place the actors within the pictures and outside their cultures. Brown therefore opts for a third frame in which the torture practices should be placed, namely a non-legal, cultural one that includes “cultural conditions and structural contexts” (Ibid.). She proposes to investigate the events at Abu Ghraib that exist “beyond the formal articulations of the law” (979). This is exactly what investigator Brent Pack
was not legally allowed to do, therefore rendering him unable to criticize the system that produced torturing soldiers.\(^7\) The soldiers of the 372\(^{nd}\) “found themselves in an ill-defined world with ambiguous expectations” (Brown 981). Brown elaborates further that the penal and domestic (American) cultures converged and created a sense of culture that allowed torture, which was found normal, or, in the words of the soldiers “the right thing to do.”

Brown notes that a register of punishment, retribution and binary, dehumanizing logic emerged in American political culture since the 1970s. She calls this, following Foucault, a “penal discourse” that framed the war on terrorism from the outset. An example of this is the “Us versus Them” rhetoric and logic of President Bush. Brown claims that “this hyper-penal context creates the necessity for a reconceptualization of the way in which punishment is present and at work in the lived spaces and practices of everyday life, well beyond the institutional forms punishment may take” (981). A discourse of punishment increasingly manifests itself in experience of social life and presents itself as normal. The normalizing or naturalizing force of this discourse enabled the 372\(^{nd}\) to behave in the way they did. Here, Brown convincingly intertwines the personal with the national. The social and the cultural are always in constant interaction with the political and the legal in the ways in which the base determines the superstructure and the superstructure in its turn overdetermines the base. Brown claims that a penal discourse is omnipresent:

It is apparent in the precedents and policies formulating and restricting the rights of prisoners, not just in war zones abroad, but in the domestic interior of the United States. And it networks through the biographies of those involved in the

\(^7\) Standard Operating Procedure is a good example of a critique of this legal structure because the film “privileges the equivocations and explanations of the various ‘bad apples’ as it thinks about everything we ask digital photographs to do for us, and the ways we fear they may deceive us” (Benson-Allott 6).
scandal, which have become the focus of soap-opera style media coverage and thus constitute primary signs in the cultural decoding of the case. (982)

Brown approaches the events at Abu Ghraib and their mediation as a structured play in which the people involved are actors with their own biographies and the setting is a theatre’s architecture. The play also has its own narrative, which “itself is based upon voyeuristic sadism, the fascination and relentless public speculation concerning how average Americans came to be private, now public, torturers” (Ibid. 983).  

Beyond the narrative of Abu Ghraib, however, is an implied cultural plot, concerning the 372nd unfulfilled “dreams of college and careers” and their actual work in fast food restaurants, rural prisons, and factories. “The sheer scale and design of American incarceration shapes their lives and stories, supplying work and a particular kind of prison logic to their labor and life experiences” (Ibid. 983). America itself is caught in a culture dictated by a penal discourse that defines the practice and experience of everyday life in terms of prison language. Brown points at the increase of prison-towns and prison-based economies and lives. The penal complexes leave their mark on ideologies, experience, and the meaning-making process at large: “communities built around multiple prisons that, in turn, serve as the primary sources of livelihood for entire regions, culminating in a reconfiguration of social and economic life in distinctly penal terms” (Brown 984). This cultural view does not restrict itself to the national, but extends to discussions of international imprisonment. The war on terrorism has left its mark: some fifty-thousand international prisoners are estimated to be held by US soldiers

8 Here another similarity between the atrocities at Abu Ghraib and the lynchings in the South is visible. Philipose writes: “Sometimes lynchings were conducted as live theater, and in certain cases onlookers were invited to participate in the torture of victims before the final act of murder” (Philipose 1059). Dora Apel adds that the photos served as souvenirs, demonstrating “the political superiority of one group over another” (92).
following September 11 (Ibid.). A prison culture is not confined to the US but has grown—alongside US international power—globally. This global “criminal justice militarization” redefined social relations “through a convergence of militaristic, police, and penal contexts” (Ibid. 985).

These changes immediately resonate within society at large, which is increasingly based on the penal system, and reconfigure public life (991). This is the “set of conditions” that preceded and interacted with the soldiers of the 372\textsuperscript{nd}. The torture practices at Abu Ghraib can be seen in this light: they are (wrongful and misplaced) personal and public retributions for September 11. The structure of feeling that was created by aggressive discourses made hatred seem reasonable and legal. Following the logic of penal discourse, it became “normal” or “natural” to torture within American democracy, or, as the soldiers in SOP claim, “it seemed the right thing to do” (SOP 50:30).
Pictures – Chapter 1

Lynndie England holding a prisoner on a leash

Sabrina Harman smiling and giving thumbs up over a dead body
Pyramid of men. Charles Graner and Sabrina Harman smiling and giving thumbs up

Hooded and wired man dubbed “Gilligan”
Chapter 2: Digital Death: Memory and the Blogosphere

For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat . . . It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not.

O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (80-81)

Look, the photographs say, *this* is what it’s like. *This* is what war *does*. And *that*, that is what it does too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins.

Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (8)

Before entering a conflict zone, soldiers are always already spectators of war. Like those who have never seen actual war, their idea of war has been formed by mediated images of combat. Whether it is through films such as *Apocalypse Now*, computer games such as *Battlefield*, the evening news, Tom Clancy’s novels, stories from friends and family, or the propaganda of the army, points of reference are created on a large scale in a world fascinated with war. This overdetermined character of the discourse of war makes it an interesting and necessary field of inquiry: the choice of young people to enlist in the army is solely based on mediated images. These war images have, as is demonstrated above by O’Brien and Sontag, the ability to awe and to horrify. Like a penal culture (as shown in chapter one), a war culture foregrounds a subject’s expectations, feelings, and knowledge of war. A nation-state such as the US, with the largest military budget in the world and its war-propagating institutions, systematically reinforces such a culture. Hence, a fiction precedes the signing of a contract that inevitably brings suffering and death. Of course, this is not new. What *is* novel, however, is a type of mediation that brings alternative points of reference: the military weblog (milblog). The war in Iraq is the first that showed avid use of new media and public interest in soldier’s productions. Today, soldiers have
the ability to instantaneously share personal experience with a larger public through their blogs but also through other social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The previous chapter showed how personal pictures can have a detrimental political effect, once picked up by the media and the public. This chapter will mainly focus on the milblog, because it combines the personal, political, visual, and discursive and thus can affect other types of media and public opinion and memory of the war.

Through this multi-faceted aspect, weblogs have found different readerships, popular and academic, conservative and progressive. This is exemplified by Colby Buzzell’s blog *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, the first milblog that received the status of a printed book. A story that starts with the bravado, machismo, and longing for adventure copied from the plethora of war movies Buzzell had consumed, gradually turns into a critique of the military, glued together with a skepticism that is void of any patriotic rhetoric. Along with Buzzell’s blog, many other internet diaries have been put into print. These printed milblogs have different political scopes, yet they all share a similar writer’s perspective—that of a soldier in combat.

Soldiers, victims of war, and embedded (photo) journalists for the first time had access to high speed internet and cameras during a US-led war. As the war went on, internet consumption in the Middle East and online-participation in discussions in America about the war rose significantly (Berenger 7). With the increase of the production, dissemination, and consumption of online (visual) texts concerning the War in Iraq, a new discourse has evolved in the media that has had direct influence on public

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9 *The Blog of War: Front-Line Dispatches from Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan* by Matthew Burden; *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families* by Andrew Carroll; *Doomesbury.com's The Sandbox: Dispatches from Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan* edited by David Stanford; *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* by Jason Christopher Hartley; and *Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War* by Matt Gallaghar.
opinion. This discourse revolves around such concepts as personal experience, trauma, and memory. Applying theories of media framing and discursive formation, this chapter attempts to show how personal blogs and personal visual material are part of discussions in the public sphere and that therefore a (visual) rhetoric of spectacle, horror, and trauma unfolds itself as the language of this new discourse of war. Consequently, this new discourse contributes to a negative memory of the war that damages a version of the US imagined community and this in its turn affects remediations of the war.

**Blogging and Media: Being There**

The production of more or less *informally* told narrative histories turns out to be a basic activity for characterisation of human actions. It is a feature of all communal memory. 

Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (17)

This aspect of cultural memory—being informal—is key in understanding the role it plays in the formation of knowledge of the past. Personal experiences of war are often informally told stories that are aimed at a specific audience: family and friends. In earlier periods, individual thoughts, fears, and desires were penned in letters that were privately addressed. With an increased globally networked society, however, this changes. Blogging is a perfect example of how the personal can become public. Milblogs such as 365 and a Wakeup (thunder6.typepad.com), Soldiersperspective.us, hooawhife.com all give a different perspective on the war (ranging from photos from common grunts to an officer’s comments, and the stories of a soldier’s wife), yet they have an informal tone, try to tell a history, and are clearly part of a community. This sense of community is strengthened by constant referencing and linking by the authors to other milblogs. Milblogging.com, the largest collection of (international) milblogs on the Internet, gives
an overview of the military blogosphere. The site organizes conferences and meetings and provides a platform for starting military bloggers. Milblogging.com shows how vast and diverse the landscape of military blogging is. One milblog’s subtitle reads, for example, “just another star among the growing constellation of milblogs that bring you reports of life in a warzone from the guys in the middle of it” (acutepolitics.blogspot.com).

The characteristics of milblogs articulated by Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan— independent, immediate, insightful, being the eyes and the ears of their audiences, taking audiences to the war zone—are aspects of the “being there.”

10 Like authentic photographs in the Age of Photoshop, reporting from the place everyone is talking about via an independent and immediate platform generates a “truth effect.” Together with milblogs’ focus on the personal, this causes a compelling and influential form of visual and discursive framing of the war that has led to a new type of reporting (professional and amateur), way of looking, public opinion, and, ultimately, way of remembering this and future wars.

Blackfive.net, another influential and popular milblog, reveals telling features about the ways in which the new media interact with the military and how the usage of new media tools contributes to a new perception, or way of seeing, the war. On the question why he started his milblog blackfive.net, war veteran Matthew Burden answers by recounting the story of one of his fellow soldiers and friend Matt Schram who got

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10 In their book on digital war reporting Donald Matheson and Stuart Allan write: “Blogs were heralded for providing a voice that appeared to some commentators distinctive in its ability to produce independent, immediate and insightful accounts of what was actually happening on the ground. This led to a form of witnessing of conflict in which the individual reporter acted less a cipher . . . and more as the audience’s technologically enhanced eyes and ears. Rather than bringing the war into people’s living rooms, the blog went some way to taking people into the war zone” (75-76).
killed in an ambush: “I was very angry about the fact that Matt’s sacrifice went unnoticed.” And later: “I could tell where there were holes in the reporting” (“PML Presents” 1:44; 3:07). Was one death not important enough for the reporter to pick up the story, the interviewer asks. Burden confirms this and continues by saying that he was not happy with the way the war was reported. Burden wants to contribute to the military blogosphere by retelling the stories of individual soldiers that were not covered in the media. In one of the most popular parts of Blackfive, “Someone You Should Know,” which has 13,5 million regular readers, Burden collects and rewrites stories from the front and people who came back, including those of the wounded. He wants to “tell those stories nobody tells,” like the one of Sergio Lopez who had to have both of his feet amputated (“Matt Burden” 2:20). Another aspect of his blog is, now that he is out of service, Burden can speak for the ones who are restricted to speak due to army public relations regulations. Blackfive is highly supportive of the US troops, critical about media coverage, and, again, claims (or strives to) tell the “true story” of the war in Iraq.

Burden describes how the “Nintendo Generation” now makes up the soldiers in the US army. “They are bringing cameras, laptops, and internet access started opening up really quick. So basically these soldiers have the same tools as the media.” With these tools, and using Burden’s blog, these soldiers can “make a difference” (“Matt Burden” 4:41). Blackfive can have an effect on how the war is framed and “twenty years ago we wouldn’t have had an effect at all” (Ibid. 4:48). Burden further explains why his milblog is so effective. Constantly, he is in search of the “real story.” What he means by this is that he gets his information from a grunt, medic, or captain who was closest to or part of an event via the means of the new media. “If I need help on a story, I put a note on my
blog saying: ‘hey, I need somebody . . . I need to figure out if this was accurate or not.’ And I’ll get a response and be able to work on it’’ (Ibid. 7:55). All the soldiers who have access to new media are potential news sources for Burden. Burden’s blog is not so much about right-wing Republican politics (however he is firm about winning the war); rather, it strives for recognition of those who fight with a patriotic belief and provide an alternative form of journalism that goes against the grain and the grand narrative the established media tell their audiences. If, in contemporary society, established media draft the first version of Iraq War history, Burden and his colleagues contribute to a memorial narrative.

Whether or not Matthew Burden is right in his claim that embedded journalists do not tell the correct version of the war, they often show how powerful pictures or video material posted on their blogs can be. In November 2004, Kevin Sites, a freelance journalist with a popular blog, recorded the killing of an unarmed wounded man in a mosque. Because Sites had a freelance status, his warblog became the platform on which he could immediately display his experience, much like milblogs. Until the moment he uploaded the video online, Sites was respected by the soldiers and their friends and family for the way he portrayed the forces. This changed after NBC picked up his material and used it in a news bulletin. Sites received over a thousand hate mails and he was caught in a dilemma: on the one hand he wanted to “seek and report the truth” but he also knew that the insurgents fighting with US troops would be more unwilling to surrender if reports of the killing reached them (Sites 15). Sites decided to post a letter on his blog, part of which said:

So here, ultimately, is how it plays out: When the Iraqi man in the mosque posed a threat, he was your enemy; when he was subdued, he was your responsibility;
when he was killed in front of my eyes and my camera, the story of his death became my responsibility. The burdens of war, as you well know, are unforgiving for all of us. (25-26)

Matheson and Allan write about his post: “the response to the blog posting was astonishing, with excerpts of the letter carried in news reports around the globe. Sites’s readership statistics, having been registered around 37,600 earlier in the month, leapt to more than 2 million the day following the post . . . His blog, he believed engendered a remarkable impact on the perceptions of the US public” (5-6). The example of Sites’s milblog shows how several media influence and borrow from each other; how blogs can affect mainstream media; how the “being there” and authentic visual material can affect perceptions of the war; and how the war is framed.

The notion of media framing and cross-media coverage is crucial in the discussion of milblogs and their impact on the media and public opinion. Paraphrasing Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Connerton states that “groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localized by a kind of mapping” (37). Military-affiliated blog writers—whether they are soldiers or their wives—form and identify with a group with its own interests and framework. A site such as Milblogging.com provides a clear roadmap in the fragmented military blogosphere; Internet users can easily find their way when searching for a specific theme or story. Additionally, Milblogs and other Internet related content became the source for information about the war pur sang. Carol Schwalbe researched the effect of news websites on the memory of the war. She found that “when the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003, the Internet ranked last as American’s primary source of war news . . . During the first week of hostilities, however, 77% of Americans went online for war news” (Schwalbe 1-2). Ralph Berenger
adds that established media “often report stories originating from the web” (1). The internet provides a pool of information where the mainstream media can tap their news from. This news tapping, however, is a process that is influenced by political and economic agendas; the media frame an event in a carefully selected (visual) idiom.

Carol Schwalbe describes the way in which media frame a certain event. Quoting Gamson and Modigliani she writes that a frame “is a central organizing idea or story that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events. . . . The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (qtd. in Schwalbe 6). The media always “select, organize, emphasize, present, and ignore” news that is out there. In this way, people can be influenced in what they think about a certain event and later in how they remember it. Schwalbe argues that US media framed the invasion of Iraq in a way that mostly showed the American perspective, emphasized victory, and excluded images of suffering and death (Schwalbe 7). “In fact, 79% of dominant images and 40% of secondary images focused on US political and military might. They reflected America’s shock-and-awe campaign, as US-led coalition forces massed on the Iraq border and warplanes bombed Baghdad” (Ibid. 14). The war was framed as a spectacle, distanced from human suffering. Schwalbe adds, “the predictable theme of US political and military might overshadowed more complex and independent perspectives, such as the Iraqi perspective, the human toil, environmental damage, or global economics” (Ibid.). In other words, the spectacle overshadowed the horror. An example of how this operates is the conquering of Baghdad and the subsequent tearing down of Saddam’s massive sculpture in the center of the city. The media frame is one of spectacle: American audiences saw an American hero climb up the statue, drape an American flag over its
head and a tank tearing it down. This was all staged like a patriotic war movie, yet Matthew Burden, the *Blackfive* author, recounts that the fight leading up to the toppling was one of the most fearsome during the conflict (“Matt Burden” 5:00).

The Internet, and especially the blogosphere, “played a large role in how people accessed, internalized, formed opinions, and shared information with others about the Iraq War.” The Iraq War was the first “global internet war” (Berenger 2). Keith et al. note that for the first time in military history, war was reported immediately, steadily and in real-time and also for the first time through the medium of Internet, which allows photo, video and written content (2). Berenger continues, “during the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath, websites demonstrated convergence by carrying text messages, audiovisual material . . . and links to similar sites with multimedia formats” (6). Information has become easily downloadable and uploadable for reporters and combatants alike, via hand-held devices that are widely used in conflict zones. “In Iraq, the new technologies are apparent everywhere as soldiers take their iPods into battle and on patrol, listen to MP3s and watch DVDs on individual computers” (Ibid.). Berenger, like Der Derian in chapter one, recognizes the truth-effect of verified images in the Age of Photoshop: “When verified as truthful, images potentially have a sledgehammer impact on viewer’s opinion formation by creating iconic images of an event” (2). Authentic pictures contribute to the “truth-effect” of the “being there”; soldiers came to believe that they alone can tell what truly occurs in Iraq and the viewers and readers of their blogs—journalists and non-professionals alike—take this for granted. Berenger aptly writes: “Stories carried on blogs and websites not only set the tone for ‘water cooler’ discussion
for general readers, but often show up on listservs [sic] that target specific interest groups, as well as influence mainstream media reporters” (7).

Blogs, Berenger argues, can cause a snowball effect because they are part of an immense converged network of news outlets. Johnson and Kaye recognize the effect blogs can have on other, more established media outlets: “Although Pew Research suggested that only 4% of Internet users turned to blogs during the Iraq war, they are important to study because their influence exceeds their readership” (165). Milblogs have the potential to contradict the military’s official reports of the war. In fear of this, the military shut down or censored several (Ibid). They continue, “Blogs gained a boost in popularity during the days after September 11, 2001, and have emerged as an important source of news for a core of Internet users since the Iraq war began” (166). Based on previous research, Thomas and Kaye give several reasons for the increased popularity of blogs during the Iraq war. To summarize, blogs written by soldiers: give more insights into the war than reportages by professional journalists; are personalized; link to other sites which contributes to a healthy debate and a sense of community; present news faster; offer a broad (political) perspective; and show images that US media refused to show (166-167). Most blogs are not institutionalized, which gives a mostly unfiltered view of the war in Iraq. Especially at the earlier stages of the war, before the censoring, and in the stages of occupation—when most censoring was called off—this had a far-reaching effect on the blogosphere and the (traditional) media influenced by it.

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11 Berenger noticed that this effect “resulted in an exponential dissemination of information in a matter of hours, if not minutes, during the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath. A less-studied aspect of this transfer of digital information is whether individual recipients process information before passing it on to others, or if any of the individuals in the multiple-step flow bothered to fact-check the information they received from obscure news agencies, bloggers, and political interest groups on the Internet, who might have been furthering their own agendas” (10).
Johnson and Kaye recognize this influence and a sense of community that instigates certain public and political participation. They propose that “[p]resumably, blogs sparked increased interest in the Iraq war and spurred readers to share what they learned on blog sites with others” (167). This added to a group identity—consisting of military blog writers and readers—that strives to be supportive, yet critical of the military and its leadership. Milblog writers and readers are well aware of the human suffering, as is visible in their stories and photographs. In their turn, milblogs have the potential to break through mainstream media narratives. Johnson and Kaye continue: “[b]logs may be places where ordinary Internet users, as recipients as well as providers of news and commentary, have a heightened sense of power to bring about political and social change” (169). Especially individual visual and written accounts of war that have gone public can dramatically influence public opinion. This is visible with the Abu Ghraib pictures, but also in a more general sense with military blogging. As Alissa Quart pointedly puts it in her article on amateur photojournalism: “the photographs that define a war gone wrong are amateur ones: the amateurs snappers’ presence altered and also helped create the scenes of violence and humiliation” (16).

**Personal Pictures: The Spectacle, the Horror**

“Modern war is a Cyborg orgy”

Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” (150)

The link between the body and technology has found its expression in the Iraq War. The line between artificial and “lived” experience has blurred in a society in which most people are “linked up”—to a machine, to a network. Alison Landsberg has argued that
memories of an event can artificially be transferred from one body to another via a screen (Landsberg 25-48). Her notion of the “prosthesis” is also picked up by Celia Lury in her book *Prosthetic Culture*. The immediate or belated mediation of visual personal experience has the capacity to constitute an act of transference and adoption of that experience. Memories—and thus knowledge—are prosthetics with a certain shape and size, and, depending on one’s subjective background, can be attached and made a part of one’s experience and, ultimately, sense of self. Knowledge in most cases is mediated information that is in constant interaction with structures of power. As was partly discussed in the previous section, knowledge of the Iraq War is framed, either in terms of spectacle or horror. Both terms adhere to theories of the prosthesis for both need an immediate connection to the personal body to have a memorable effect. Portable and omnipresent screens and other forms of intimate media dominate the personal and public spheres; a culture of the screen has established itself. Such a culture provides a historically unique platform for depictions of spectacle and horror. The personal pictures—“vernacular photography” as Mirzoeff calls amateur photography—and the “war cam” view both entered into the private sphere during the Iraq war.

Truth, documentation, and proof became pivotal terms in the second Iraq War. The hanging of Saddam Hussein was filmed and televised, as were the photographs of his dead sons. These visual proofs were the ultimate good ending to a battle between good and evil. The similarity between the chase for Saddam and a Hollywood plot made the whole affair understandable to an American audience. In a sense, the Iraq War was narrativized: “the monster Saddam finally dies in the sequel of the Gulf War,” Mirzoeff describes (87). Added to that, Edward Chin, the Marine who—on prime-time
television—first covered a statue of Saddam with an American flag, was made a national hero. Mirzoeff dryly comments: “can Saddam Disneyland be far behind? And will we have to read the Baudrillard book about it?” (88). Summarizing his view of the first months of media-coverage and visual imagery about the Iraq invasion, Mirzoeff claims that “the immense surfeit of visual information during the war was conducive to the annihilation of effective narratives about what was happening . . . The images were fashioned to tell just one story. The embedded media told us bedtime stories with a single traditional moral, the old-fashioned triumph of Good over Evil” (90).

Actual experiences of war can engage in conflict with prosthetic memories and points of reference concerning combat. In other words, the horror confronts the spectacle with its unreality. In her concise essay on military blogging and its influence on war culture, Stacey Peebles writes that

Often . . . soldiers go to war and find that their own experiences are quite different, sometimes maddeningly so, from the representations of previous wars that have informed their conception of and conscription into military service . . . For a soldier directly encountering the violence of war, that violence is suddenly and often traumatically made real by preconception of pain or the presence of the dead and wounded—which Elaine Scarry calls the incontestable reality of the body. (1665)

Thus, actual experience of war collides with the artificial memory of war. Schwalbe quotes Chambers and Culbert: “The public memory of war in the twentieth century has been created less from a remembered past than a manufactured past, one substantially shaped by images in documentaries, feature films, and television programs” (qtd. in Schwalbe 4). She adds that if Chambers and Culbert were writing today they would no doubt add the Internet. However, as shown in the previous section, internet reports from the war in the form of milblogs tell a story that can go against the grain.
Milbloggers reflect on their experience and how it relates to their preconception of war. Peebles discusses the work of Anthony Swofford and Colby Buzzell, the former a writer and ex-soldier who fought in the Gulf War, the latter a milblogger whose blog was the first of its kind to be put into print. Peebles describes how they are full of anticipation before they go to war and how their excitement is dulled by the actual experience:

What follows their [Swofford’s and Buzzell’s] enthusiastic consumption of the illicit pleasure of war films, however, is a crisis of non-identification, a recognition of the vulnerability inherent in their position as representation themselves . . . The result is a lingering uncertainty about what war means for their sense of identity, as significant points of reference like the movies and the military itself are emptied, at least in part, of their seductive power. (1663)

The crisis of non-identification Peebles notices is a pivotal concept in the discussion of war blogs. Buzzell writes in his chapter “Part One: Help Wanted” that he was a helpless figure on the job market, working odd jobs ranging from “Toys-R-Us guy” to “flower-delivery guy” (Buzzell 13). One night, he met an old High School friend at a bar who became a Marine right after finishing school. They started talking about life as a Marine and “it sounded pretty cool . . . He made it sound like joining the Marines was like joining a party frat with weapons that gave out paychecks, which of course sounded good to me, and maybe the globe-and-eagle Marine Corps tattoo with the words ‘Semper Fi’ over it might look kinda cool on my forearm” (11). One year after this conversation, and many half-paid paychecks later, Buzzell decided to join the Marines. When he got to the recruiting station, however, the recruiting officer told him they were over their quota. Disappointed, Buzzell exits the station. Outside, an Army recruiter tells him the magic words: “the Army offers two-year enlistments right now and up to a four-thousand dollar signing bonus” (19). Buzzell continues, “[r]ight when I hear him say that, the weirdest thing happened. I immediately envisioned myself in an Army uniform sing Airborne
Ranger cadences. I felt like the Samuel L. Jackson character in *Pulp Fiction* when he says ‘Well, shit, Negro, that’s all you had to say’” (19). This is the first of many references to popular culture Buzzell makes in his blog and book. As Buzzell’s work shows, his (mis)identification with fictional plots and characters created a personal frame of reference that partly led him to enlist—besides the financial motivation and lack of opportunity.

After Buzzell posted a story called “Men in Black” (also a SF-movie), which talked about an insurgent attack, his blog was censored because the post included his concerns about lack of water and ammunition. His book, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, is a product of this censoring: all he could not tell when he was in the Army he published. Because of the Army’s distrust of Milblogs, Buzzell is not optimistic about their future: “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if one day the military banned blogs from soldiers in combat zones” (Kline and Burstein 269). Killing time with his blog was allowed, yet when he reported about actual killing, the Army exerted its propagandistic power.

The meaning-making process relating to the war has been affected by personal blogs and the pictures posted on them; hence, the ways in which the Iraq war will be remembered and re-mediated are influenced by this changed conception. Peebles correctly observes: “Buzzell may dismiss his service in Iraq as something to be survived and then forgotten, but the story of that service becomes a space of rich emotional content for many others when he begins recording it in a blog . . . [D]igital technology and the Internet have changed the way the United States both conducts and watches the war in Iraq” (1671). What is remembered of the war are conflicting images. On the one hand, an “attractive” spectacle is shown and, on the other, the horror of individual suffering and
death. Carroll Schwalbe writes that the war “happened over there,” but she does not include the war that happened on the computer screens of family and friends of soldiers and journalists who paid attention to the human face of the war, the “being there.”

The technological devices with which soldiers communicate and archive their experience have partly determined how the war in Iraq is viewed, re-viewed, and remembered. The photographs and short clips of the dead and wounded ask for critical and active readings. Different ways of seeing war are thus enabled, but all aim to show the “true” face of war. Donna Haraway writes: “The ‘eyes’ made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life” (Haraway “Situated Knowledges” 116). The (technological) eyes of the other influence senses of self, or the way we relate to the visible. Celia Lury recognizes this: “The creation and pervasiveness of images has also had a profound—if often unrecognized—significance in modern self-understandings” (105). The images of soldiers at the front have shown that the reality of war is one of horror, not one of spectacle.

Conceptions of self-identity are changing in a society in which personal pictures and narratives make up the discourse of war. The “being there” is a key element in this prosthetic, mnemotechnological process. Lury underwrites this: “As the individual is surrendered to present-ness, the moment of transience and the instantaneous, techniques of narrativised self-identity have undergone considerable revision” (105). This revision is crucial in interpreting the US as producer of a war culture. Today, the private is always

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12 Collections of war photographs made by American soldiers began to appear as soon as the invasion of Iraq was over. Websites such as mindprod.com have the ability to truly shock and disgust (this is not a website for sensitive readers).
already public and if it is understood that the public is something that is (sub) consciously selected from and appropriated, then the relation between both spheres becomes even more inseparable. Lury provides a telling metaphor for this relation between the private and the public: “. . . the private is made into publicity in contemporary society. It is represented as the (unstable) mechanism by which an individually experienced hallucination is translated into a collective nightmare and is thus an example of what happens when the allure of publicity cannot be resisted, when the tain of the mirror becomes visible” (114). In identifying hallucinations and nightmares as being part of the social imagination, Lury enters into a discussion of ghosts, haunting, and disturbing pasts. The past, thus, is something that eternally returns. Together with the archival capacity of the Internet, a pool of imagery and personal narratives indeed potentially enables eternal use of the personal picture of war.13

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13 Mirzoeff, borrowing from Nietzsche, Freud, and Benjamin claims that “eternal return” is a “disturbing sense of return from the past.” He continues, “the eternal return is the presence of death in life and of unseeing in seeing. The return undercuts all narratives, especially those of progress and triumph” (96). In a sense, guilt and trauma—as we see with the Abu Ghraib soldiers, military blogs and soldiers returning home—can haunt a person and a nation. Especially scenes of horror have a lasting and haunting capability. Sociological studies have shown that images are very effective in the constitution of memory. In line with this research, Schwalbe writes: “as images of the Iraq War become etched on our collective memory, they will shape the way the nation remembers and makes sense of this conflict” (5). Twice as many war photos were published during the Iraq War as during the Gulf War (Ibid. 6).
Chapter 3 – It Hurts, It Kills

[T]he all-volunteer force that is presently in Iraq grew up on video games, was regularly exposed to the thirty-second “the Few, the proud, the Marines” ads, and finally saw images of two airplanes deliberately crashing into the World Trade Center replayed ad nauseum on network television. Should we be surprised that documenting their activities in Iraq with personal camcorders is a way of inserting themselves into a video adventure of their own making?

Jeffrey Chown, “Documentary and the Iraq War” (479)

*Generation Kill* and *The Hurt Locker*, as re-mediations of the war in Iraq, are influenced by the stories of personal trauma, suffering and death and also by a more critical view of the US. This new discourse finds its roots at the margins of the US media landscape, namely the military blogosphere and personal pictures and narratives, as shown in the previous chapters. Besides this, a penal and a war culture foregrounds soldier’s subjectivities. This chapter will take these presumptions as its vantage point. A central concept will be the term “militainment,” or the interconnectedness of the military with the entertainment industry, which reinforces a war culture through its interpellative quality. Virtual and actual warfare converged since information technology enabled individuals to place themselves in artificial war situations. Additionally, the US Army increasingly immersed itself with technologies of remote-control; both of weaponry and young minds playing and watching Pentagon-sponsored games and films. Indeed, as Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard have argued about the first Gulf War, the war in Iraq is virtual. Yet, it *did* take place. Baudrillard’s famous and notorious essay “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” described how, in the early nineties, the screen and the newly-born news Channel CNN reported the war around the clock. This televised war view fits perfectly in advanced consumer society; war became a commodity provided by cable television. James Chapman writes: “the cultural theory critique of virtual war maintains
that the modern media project a sanitized image of war: one that is fought by technology rather than by human beings” (Chapman 97). This chapter will not deny that a virtual war exists; on the contrary, it will underscore the importance of virtual perception and the structures of power it reinforces. Yet, this chapter will pay attention to the productions that are critical and self-reflexive of the system in which they operate. Generation Kill and The Hurt Locker are valid starting points.

Generation Kill, a HBO-miniseries covering the invasion of Iraq, and The Hurt Locker, an Academy Award winning film covering the occupation and rebuilding of Iraq, are Hollywood productions highly acclaimed by both mass and critical publics; the audiences of these filmic productions are diverse and vast. These institutionalized re-mediations are critical or realistic about the War in Iraq. They depict a new type of soldier without a propagandic layer or interference from the Pentagon. This soldier is not a heroic fighter, but a vulnerable human. This is in stark contrast with the World War II hero or Cold War one-man Army. This new definition of soldier is partly made possible by new ways of seeing, through soldier’s pictures, blogs, and personal narratives and direct internet communication by the networked digital community. Cameras and internet changed the way audiences view war—they much more experience it as it is. This thought is also transmitted in The Hurt Locker and Generation Kill.

Sally-Ann Totman, in her analysis of the connection between policy and film, writes: “since the events of September 11, 2001, Hollywood has refrained from engaging in such a controversial topic as Iraq and left that task to the documentary makers and political analysts” (Totman 117). GK and HL disprove this statement, especially in the post-Bush era. Also, blockbusters such as The Green Zone (2010) show that Hollywood
has changed its politics, alongside public opinion. After 9/11, “record numbers of people in the West flocked to the cinemas,” Cynthia Weber writes (1). Cinema not only became an escapist site, but also a battlefield in the war against terrorism. Weber argues that the real and the hyperreal collapsed after the events of 9/11 and that therefore many of the films that came out after the attacks serve as metanarratives for experiencing the atrocities (3). Weber, like Totman, links official policy and popular beliefs. Films that were released after the attacks on the World Trade Center mark “a site in which official US foreign policy converged with popular symbolic and narrative resources to confront the ‘United States’ with questions about its individual, national, and international subjectivities, especially in relation to the war on terror” (4). James Chapman, in his concise analysis of war films in War and Cinema states:

The outcome [of the war in Iraq] will surely determine its filmic representation: Hollywood, as it always has done, will respond to the ideological and cultural imperatives of the present when it comes to providing a filmic historiography of America’s wars. (Chapman 170)

Film has an explanatory function. The descriptive nature of its representations has the power to naturalize popular beliefs. Historically, the grand narratives of America’s twentieth-century wars have been told on the screen. Connected to this is Hollywood’s economic motive: war sells. What sells even better is a representation of war that confirms general assumptions about a war: “As with Vietnam, Iraq needs explanation in a visual aesthetic that speaks in the language of its own time” (Chown 486).

Jeffrey Chown has carefully inventoried and commented on soldier’s documentaries that came out during the Iraq War. Often, these filmic representation resemble the blogs described in the second chapter: they have met small audiences, but their effect on new discourses was far-reaching. Like milblogs, these camcorder stories
are fragmented accounts of daily life in a combat zone and they function as memorial
devices. Chown writes: “inexpensive and easy-to-use video technology facilitates this
commemorative activity, but it also means that such reports are part of an ongoing flow
of history rather than a nostalgic encapsulation of its meaning” (474). A film like *Combat
Diary: The Marines of Lima Company* (2006) by Michael Epstein was aired, not
surprisingly, during the 2006 Memorial Day weekend. Another film, *The War Tapes*,
shows how early accounts of soldier’s experiences in Iraq gradually found a larger
audience among American cinema goers. This film, an assembly of footage shot by
American soldiers at the frontlines, was highly acclaimed for its montage by Deborah
Scranton and was nominated for an Oscar. Both *Combat Diary* and *The War Tapes* show
the first steps of institutionalization of independent films featuring soldier’s accounts of
the war in Iraq.\(^{14}\) As their titles suggests, these films focus on the “being there,” personal
accounts, fragments, and cinematic realism. Chown adds that they offer a “new visual
paradigm that is more subjective, spontaneous, and unfiltered than previous models”
(476-477). This view supports the claim that a new discourse on war has emerged and has
laid the foundation for a novel cinematic genre that incorporates the grunt’s view and
focuses on unfiltered trauma, suffering, and death in realistic terms.

**Hurt Lockers**

We have few words and virtually no visual conventions able to recognize the sadness of
death as it happens, while preserving the dignity of those it is happening to.

Robin Anderson, *A Century of Media, a Century of War* (199)

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\(^{14}\) Lesser known are *Battleground: 21 Days on the Empire’s Edge* (2004), *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005),
It is no accident that the phrase “hurt locker” finds its origin in the colloquial language of the Vietnam War. In his 1978 novel *Fields of Fire*, Jim Webb refers to, by means of the phrase, being in trouble, pain, or bad shape. In recent years, it has been integrated in military jargon and used by soldiers returning home. Brian Turner, an Iraq veteran, writes in one of his poems: “Open the hurt locker / and see what there is of knives / and teeth. Open the hurt locker and learn / how rough men come hunting for souls” (Turner). The first widely popular film that offered a critical exposé of what occurred in Iraq is Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2008). The film starts with a quotation from Chris Hedges: “the rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug.” In this film, the viewer is confronted with the rush, addiction and lethality of armed conflict; war is the one thing that is both loved and hated to death. All soldiers in the bomb squad that is followed are in some way “hurt”: James is the addict, Sandborn is unmotivated, and Eldridge is in constant fear. Recurring are contradictory sentences such as “Iraq is death” (11:50); “Going to war is a once in a lifetime experience. It can be fun!” (45:43); “If I bleed out on the street like a pig, nobody gives a shit” (1:53:18). Additionally, the visual language is telling: James’s bomb suit acts a metaphor for protection, but within a perimeter of forty meters of an exploding bomb a suit does not help; a bomb placed inside the dead body of a boy can be read as a symbol for the danger that resides within; a scene with James standing in a supermarket lane shows the contrast and displacement of his situation with the latter sequence.

The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 announced a new era in American foreign policy and a worldwide diffused enemy of the West. Also, it introduced an epoch of fear of the unknown, to be felt nationally and internationally. In
line with Edward Said’s prophetic thoughts in *Orientalism*, the Arab became the ultimate other. Robin Anderson analyzed some of the myriad representations of the American Army in post-9/11 cinema. She looks at the reception of *Black Hawk Down* (2001) to uncover Washington’s appropriation strategy. With a premier screening at the White House, Ridley Scott’s film was politically backed by the Bush administration. Indeed, the movie shows suffering and death, both of the American and Somali side but, Anderson argues, the film’s heroes are the type of soldier that fit into Bush’s idea of the “War on Terror” (212-213). Like *Saving Private Ryan*, *BHD* shows war up close in a cinéma vérité fashion. Its reviewers commented that it showed war as it really is (213). The “being there” is an important motor behind the film’s popular and critical success. *BHD*, though, offers a pornographic version of war, something to be consumed at a safe distance, without psychological participation. *BHD*’s documentaristic claim is undermined by its inability to show death without the use of spectacle. Film is limited by its artifice in this matter.

There certainly is an emotional appeal in *BHD*, yet the internal conflict of soldiers is overshadowed by the vivid representation of death and destruction. The morbid attraction to “realistic” war footage undermines the psychological effect of the imagination. Because *BHD* is so visually explicit and extremely fast-paced, the film can be seen as the military pornography Colby Buzzell speaks of in his book. *The Hurt Locker*, in contrast, deals with internal conflicts and the different mental and somatic

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15 President George W. Bush reacted well within the American frame of reference: “George Bush asked rhetorically, ‘have you heard the saying out West, Wanted Dead or Alive?’ Certainly other models were available in that same cultural firmament, but at that moment in history American vulnerability transmuted with fighting speed into military violence and retaliation. The culture of war and the icons of heroism would be drawn upon and redrawn for the genres that would come to represent America’s new War on Terror, and blaze the path to victory over the forces of Evil. These were the sentiments repeated with increasing ferocity in the media in the aftermath of the attacks.” (Anderson 201)
reactions to actual war and death. The film is aware of its inability to, through its artifice, show actual suffering and death and therefore draws upon the empathic and imaginative capacity of its audience to evoke appropriate emotional response. Heroism is challenged in *HL*: going into combat zones has nothing to do with patriotic courage, but rather with addiction to the thrill, or the extreme fear of it. Hence, the film is not about the Iraq War in itself, nor an exact replica of it, but about the effects of something as nasty as war. It is not ironically attractive in its spectacle, but offers stylized ugliness. This is visible in the film’s narrative, cinematography, and ethical debate.

Anderson claims that in *Black Hawk Down*, the soldiers lose much of their individuality for the sake of the message the film tries to convey: casualties will occur, but together we can fight the war on terrorism. This is clearly shown in the film’s cinematography. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, the film moves too fast to mourn the death of individual characters and, “individuals are not in focus in *Black*, because so many of them are killed” (217). Anderson writes: “the rhetoric of the camera tells us that we are next to our heroes, fighting with them, not through them . . . But we don’t grieve for the fallen; there is no time, as another bullet slices the Dolby-ized theatrical air” (218). *HL* zooms in on the individual’s separate reaction to war: addiction, repulsion, and trauma. The characters wait for the action to take place and often the lack of it causes serious trauma. The unpredictability of war is highlighted, where in *BHD* strategies are followed and tactics are in place. Many films that came out after the War on Terrorism was declared showed a psychological detachment of the audience with the characters on the screen, who lost their sense of humanity in their heroism. The experience of visual (screened) combat has the ability to thoroughly purge “empathy, compassion, and
responsibility” of human life (Ibid.). “The perceptual shift from concerned observer to vicarious participant allows [BHD] to depict the death of American soldiers without recoiling from it. This is the aesthetic hook that hinges this particular movie to a new brand of war promotion” (Ibid.). In Anderson’s view, films like Black Hawk Down perfectly fit into a war culture that reinforces dominant political thought that is based on military intervention. Fortunately, she mentions that by 2003, the reality of the war in Iraq began to break through the heroic fantasies produced in Hollywood. Today’s critical soldiers “are the future veterans, able to break the prevailing constraints, who will speak out against the conduct of the next war,” Anderson notes (289). We have not only seen this in the military blogosphere but also in the participation of actual soldiers and Marines in cinematic re-mediations such as HL and GK.

Roger Stahl, in his original and well-researched book on militainment—the intertwined relationship between military and entertainment industries—argues that from the start of the twenty-first century dominant perceptions of war have shifted from interpretations in terms of the spectacle to re-experience in interactive war. Militainment normalizes certain attitudes and practices concerning war. The current discourse of and on war connects citizen-subjects with the military apparatus. Stahl, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, speaks of an “integrated machine of hardware and software interfacing” with this military device. “It is through this variety of channels, practices, and discourses that citizen identity and military power continue to co-evolve” (15). War and its representations have “invaded the home front” and thus manifested themselves as up-close experiences (Stahl 3). Where first the spectacle was used to “control public opinion by distancing, distracting, and disengaging the citizen from the realities of war,” today an
interactive mode of war promotes “first-person fantasies of war” (Ibid.). Consequently, a virtual citizen-soldier emerged who is invited “to step into a fantasy of first-person, interactive war,” which reinforces a regime of control and establishes a pro-war discourse (Ibid.). Understanding the relationship between subjects and war is crucial in understanding how “power functions to manufacture war itself” (Stahl 4). Justifications for war are needed to actually fight them, but less tangible ideological bases might be as important. In contemporary American society, ideologically fragmented and individualistic as it is, the interpellative power of pro-war media discourses—including games and films—lay a foundation that ultimately presents state violence as something to be pleasurably consumed. Today, the politically highly charged grey area between entertainment and war has become a “barometer” for “public attitudes about war” (Stahl 10).

Stahl advances where Anderson stopped in her discussion of militainment and its connection to the citizen-subject. Virtual citizen-subjects, in Stahl’s opinion, fight through the depicted hero on the screen, where Anderson argues they fight alongside them. In this globally networked world, Stahl’s theory is highly plausible and it explains how politically detached citizens can have strong pro-war opinions in an individualistic society. Films like Iron Man (2008) and Transformers (2007) had huge audiences; they were both sponsored by the Pentagon’s Hollywood Liaison Office (Stahl 96). Stahl and Anderson describe the dominant cultural discourse. Yet, counter-hegemonic tendencies

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16 In Stahl’s view, the citizen’s relationship to the soldier has been rewired to a degree that war has become consumable on a private level: citizens can choose and tailor-fit their consumption. The period from 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq “might be called the ‘militainment bubble,’ where audience attention, rallying effects, culture industry profit motives, and Pentagon interests aligned to produce a certain kind of consumable war” (Stahl 140).

17 Stahl introduces powerful concepts such as “full spectrum dominance” and “recreational violence” that linguistically cover US government’s explicit and implicit warfare agenda.
presented themselves: first, lesser known films such as those inventoried by Chown, and more recently, widely-known films and series such as *HL* and *GK*. In certain respect, these filmic representations of the Iraq war function as meta-narratives; they contest and critique a wholly positive, spectacular, and citizen-soldier view of the war through constant ironic allusions to war culture. One of the soldiers in *HL* is addicted to war games, *GK* systematically references to war movies and the way US propaganda influences young minds. Also, *GK* interchanges thrilling images shot by the director with camcorder shots made by one of the Marines, deliberately showing the discrepancy between them. This shows that the Iraq war is not a clean war, or a sanitized digital event, but an actual war fought by real people.

Dialectical thought about and resistance toward war culture diminish with the expansion of the militainment industry. Talking about post-Vietnam war films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon*, Stahl writes that, strikingly, these anti-war films do not include critiques of war policies. He continues, “this emerging class of war films portrayed war as an internal crisis located neither in the field of politics nor between combatants but within the soldier himself” (79). Similarly, the concept of “recruitment” in today’s war culture undermines critical thinking. Stahl describes recruitment as a “generalized cultural condition” in the US (48). He claims, “the interactive war consistently offers the civic sphere a standing invitation to become a virtual recruit” (Ibid.). This Althusserian interpellation into such a culture distracts the citizen-subject from necessary deliberation and critique of the political motivations behind war. Another trend is a misplaced and distractive new patriotism, which was born in the 1990s. The question “why we fight” is answered by: “for the soldiers themselves.”
Films such as *Saving Private Ryan* got full support from the Pentagon. Why? The film explicitly displays war as a gory business—the realism of the film is established by blood splattering on the camera’s lens. Stahl answers, “the narrative takes war out of the realm of public debate by justifying it with the soldier-in-crisis, whose rescue is not up for debate . . . The magnification of the military apparatus, the containment of the drama within the ranks, and the ultimate extraction of war from the sphere of public debate” (80). This diverts attention from political engagement to plot and hermeneutic readings of script.  

A film like *The Hurt Locker* is no epic, elevated tale but rather a “realistic” account, in the sense that it is a film about experience rather than fantasy or myth.

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18 This fictionalizing strategy is exemplified in the non-fiction world as well: the well-known saving of Private Jessica Lynch was strategically plotted to divert the public gaze from the grand picture to a microscopic rescue. Staged as “one of ours” versus “them,” the drama unfolded itself as a constructed narrative.
Generation Kill?

I think we have this misguided perception of the greatest generation—our fathers and grandfathers. Somehow there was this civility—that WWII was this, you know, good versus evil, that clear-cut dichotomy [sic]. But it was messy—it was just as nasty and ruthless and vicious as what we have in the Middle East. They just didn’t have cameras there every step on the way home . . . This is the most publicized war we’ve ever had.

Sgt. Brad “Iceman” Colbert

“The new face of American war” and “war unplugged” are two taglines that are placed under the title of the HBO miniseries Generation Kill (2008). The novelty of the Iraq war is that there were cameras aimed at “every step on the way home.” Brad Colbert aptly states that, indeed, no war is clean. Its filth only becomes more visible when up-close documentation proliferates. Generation Kill grapples with this phenomenon by repeatedly pointing at the omnipresence of the (video) camera. Often, “authentic” hand-held images are inserted, a blinking “rec” at the upper right corner of the screen. Pictures are taken, and through the eyes of the camera, the “being there” of the viewer is accentuated. According to James Chapman, the two foremost characteristics of “virtual war” are its “insistence on ‘clean’ images of combat and its privilege of optical subjectivity” (95). This view is contested by the proliferation of actuality footage and personal (visual) narratives produced by soldiers in the field. As argued before, these images, in their turn, break through the traditional “virtual war” and are appropriated by institutionalized media in a more critical discourse of war. Clean images of combat are not visible in Generation Kill and The Hurt Locker; surgical precision is replaced by the bluntness of a 12mm.

The seven parts of the series insert the viewer into the First Recon Battalion, which were the first ground troops to set foot on Iraqi soil. We enter this Battalion
together with Evan Wright, an embedded journalist, on whose book the series is based. Roger Stahl’s description of the “virtual citizen-soldier” is applicable to the situation the viewer is in: somewhere in between voyeur and participant. The camera bumps along with the humvee and cinematographic conventions are often ignored. The Marines are not censored in their language and philosophical reflections of films such as *Apocalypse Now* never take place. This type of realism featured in *GK* is only possible in a world in which everyone is a possible producer of the visual. In *Generation Kill* carnage is often shown through the lens of a digital, hand-held camera.

Ironically, the soldiers in the series refer to their culture, which is obsessed with the image. In part one, “Get Some,” they ask questions like: “What do you think? CNN’s gonna buy your version of the war?” (08:40) and, straight into the camera: “How do you feel on this moment of major invasion?” (42:29). In the second part, “The Cradle of the World,” one marine shouts: “CNN would definitely pay for that,” during the invasion of Baghdad (23:00). The bravado and machismo are apparent in the first days of the invasion. The filming is in line with the footage actually seen on CNN at that time: the war apparatus and spectacular bombings from a distance. However, as the invasion advances, the images change. In one scene in part two, the camera films within a humvee. The road is full of dead, burned bodies. The Marines are supposed to stay calm and rational, while they are deprived of sleep and food (34:20). In part six, “Stay Frosty,” the camera zooms in on a decapitated body. This image lasts, like the ones of dead young children and charcoaled bodies. These images are not spectacular military pornography, nor a distanced, clean depiction of war. Closer to the reality of war, we cannot come though fictional film. In a sarcastic tone, one Marine comments on a dead body: “She’s
dead, there’s nothing we can do. [Evan Wright takes a picture. Marine]: Well, well, well, who’s the sicko in our humvee now? The psycho-ass jarheads, or the fucking liberal media just looking for a little exploitation?” (35:23). The Marine indirectly talks to us and makes an ethical appeal. Also, this instance illustrates how GK plays with the way the war was picked up by the mainstream media later on during the invasion.

At the start of the invasion of Iraq, “US television personalities interpreted and explained, described and repeated, a discourse that tended to create distance from the more immediate terror of human experience spoken by the victims themselves,” writes Robin Anderson (199). In GK the ones who explain are the soldiers and, to a lesser degree, the Iraqis themselves. While underway, in part six, the convoy encounters a group of refugees. A woman speaks directly to one of the soldiers in English. A conversation unfolds:

Thank you for letting me pass on my own road in my own country. [Marine]: Excuse me ma’am. [Woman]: Why are you Americans here? [Marine]: We wanna help you ma’am. [Woman]: You know I come from Baghdad. It is a very beautiful city and you are bombing it. This is to make my life better? [Other Marine]: Damn it, Brad, we don’t have to take this kind of guff. We’re liberating these ungrateful bitches. [Woman]: You know this is a very beautiful country and our President is very stupid. Maybe you are here for liberation. I don’t know. But because of oil, it feels like a war of aggression. (24:45)

This is definitely more critical for a mainstream audience than “coverage that was awed by the spectacle, cleverly referenced and calmed with the stories deemed appropriate by the gatekeepers” (Anderson 199). If Saving Private Ryan and Black Hawk Down were accepted by the gatekeepers of the dominant politics of that time, GK shows a counter hegemonic trend in Hollywood.

In one of the last scenes of the series, the Marines gather to watch the footage one of them shot of the invasion. The camera is aimed at them. First, “hoohas” and “yeahs”
sound from the group, but as the images get nastier, the bravado and machismo is replaced by silence. One by one, the men walk away from the screen. Confronted by the results of their weapons they come to realize things about themselves and the cause for which they fought. This last scene sums up the argument made in this chapter. As an audience, we are also unsettled. We have been watching a remediation of a war in which every move was documented. Even in a belated representation like this series, personal images can pierce through the soap bubble that distorted our vision of the war. Military force is based upon deception, even more so in an age of the visual; however, in this networked society in which the microscopic can become global with the clicks of a camera and a mouse button, this deception can be contested by clear perception. As virtual citizen-soldiers, audiences can be, in Barthes’s term, punctured by the visual.
**Conclusion**

Before the weapon comes the image. We think others to death before we invent the battle-axe or ballistic missiles with which to actually kill them.

Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy* (10)

What was needed in order to apprehend the discourse of war in a new way was personal technology and direct access to the networked public sphere. Robin Anderson describes a media landscape that existed at the beginning of the invasion of Iraq. The war in Iraq created another frame of reference, a discourse that paid attention to human suffering and death through the mechanical eyes of the (video) camera. As shown in the previous chapters, the images of human suffering and death influenced mainstream media and, on a grander scale, the way Americans view themselves and how the world views the US. A rhetoric of inflictors and inflicted began to emerge. First visible as quirks of the artist, these critical and personal (visual) narratives and commentaries have been gradually incorporated by gatekeeping media institutions such as CNN and Fox News. The blogosphere—and mainly milblogs—has altered our vision of America’s war(s). The last chapter attempted to show how America’s movie industry has gradually integrated and appropriated this discourse of the margins and consequently created a new genre of cinematic realism. Many films were released during the first five years after the invasion that depicted the American occupation of Iraq. These films give a critical optic of the human suffering and death that was unavoidably there, but which was not shown in the mainstream media. However, excellent as they are in scope, these films did not attract large audiences, other than fervent cinephiles and academics.

The new technologies of the visual can potentially have an impact on collective memory, when they in turn influence remediations that are consumed by the masses.
Sociologist Celia Lury writes that “the unified and stable ego constituted in narrative realism has been replaced by psychic discontinuity and incoherence” (105). What she means by this is that the modern conception of historiography has been replaced by a postmodern notion of the construction of public memory. An older notion of the representation of war that allows “for vicarious (and safe) enjoyment of its thrilling and troubling spectacle and for the chance to take a peek at life and death in extremis,” gradually is being replaced by a more personal and up-close fabrication of the experience of war (Peebles 1662). According to Siegfried Kracauer “historicism is concerned with the photography of time. The equivalent of its temporal photography would be a giant film depicting the temporally interconnected events from every vantage point” (qtd. in Lury 126). By means of the Abu Ghraib pictures and other soldier productions, personally documented life is well on its way to substitute traditional historiography because it provides these different vantage points and temporal interconnections. This form of commemoration is not in the hands of the powerful and thus can potentially resist hegemonic codes.

Following Michel Foucault, Nicholas Mirzoeff asserts that “power seeks to eliminate its history as a means of perpetuating itself, even to the extent of exercising its ghost” (Mirzoeff 93). History, facts, and truth are constructed, while they are presented and generally accepted as natural. Images that contest dominant constructions of the real can easily be hijacked when the means of presenting them are in the possession of gate-keeping institutions. The democratic aspect of the internet is that it is not owned by anyone. Therefore, images that do not adhere to dominant representations can create alternative discourses. Especially in a world in which the personal and private are almost
immediately made public, challenging perceptions of reality can mushroom. The online public sphere—as a realm of our social life in which citizens can freely discuss matters of general interest—affects the national consciousness. Without hardly any explicit strategy, it has the potential to be detrimental to America’s cultural hegemonic position in the world, simply because it enables citizens to reflect critically upon their government’s actions.

The hegemony of the visual strengthens in a converged culture. Convergence is about the blurring of certain boundaries between journalists and soldiers, the visual and the textual, the personal and political, the private and the public, the real and its representations, and between memory and history. In a converged culture, opposites meet and cooperate in order to add critiques of social life. The Iraq war is the first digital war, where citizens are soldiers, and where the binaries, ironically, converge. Soldiers became journalists and their stories were incorporated by America’s (visual) hegemony. Therefore, the war in Iraq is a converging war. President Obama has recently sent more troops to the Afghan region in order to fight the Taliban. Support from other countries is needed to defeat this “enemy of democracy.” Let us hope that the mediations and remediations of this enduring conflict will affect global public opposition to a war that will inevitably lead to more suffering and death.


