The Subversive Effect of the Shadow Archive

On Florian Göttke's Toppled

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Essay – December 31, 2007

Florian Göttke collected hundreds of press and amateur photographs of the toppling of statues of Saddam Hussein from the internet. He used this digital archive to create the iconographic project *Toppled*, as well as a special contribution to this issue of *Open*. [1] *Toppled* raises urgent questions about contemporary forms of iconoclasm and iconolatry, about the aesthetic and political effect of images in the contemporary public domain and about the potential of subversive shadow archives.

Statues and portraits of Saddam Hussein as general, demagogue, child-lover, Arab leader, devout Muslim, soldier, spiritual leader, businessman . .. Starting with the now iconic image of the toppling of the immense statue of Hussein with outstretched arm on Firdous Square in Baghdad on 9 April 2003, with the entry of the Americans, Florian Göttke's picture essay also follows the turbulent afterlife of the statues of the deposed despot. Not only were they removed from their pedestals, they were also physically 'battered' afterwards by Iraqi citizens. American soldiers took photographs of each other posing in victory beside the remains. Pieces of the statues eventually ended up as war booty in American and English museums and are sold as souvenirs on internet auctions. Even before his arrest on 14 December 2003 and his hanging on 30 December 2006, the dictator became a zombie made of stone, bits and bytes.

Göttke's iconographic reading of the images that he gathered through systematic internet searches can be regarded as a special form of 'citizen journalism', but also as an inquiry into how images and representations are culturally determined. *Toppled* is a heterogeneous and hybrid archive in which amateur photographs and professional news images are juxtaposed in a non-hierarchical manner so as to create an informal report. It is a form of reporting arising from the mingling of different visual and media genres, political spheres and social domains and is thus far from unambiguous. A legion of narrative lines can be unravelled from it: for his contribution to this issue of *Open*, for example, Göttke followed the ways that American soldiers dealt with relics of the Saddam statues.

My concern here, however, is with the project as a whole. In the first place, *Toppled* addresses the problem of the phenomenon of iconoclasm, but it also takes a closer look at amateur photographs in relation to other snapshots by soldiers of the war in Iraq that fall outside the project. Finally, there is the question of how *Toppled* functions as a 'shadow archive'.

Iconoclash

The statues of Saddam gave expression to the carefully staged, excessive personality cult surrounding his person. Their removal from private and public spaces in Iraq was a special and in a certain sense impossible task. The iconoclastic urge to have done once and for all with the pictures and representations of a fallen ruler or a brought down power would seem to be vain in a visual, digital culture dominated by the logic of endless reproduction. Hardly any control, after all, can be exercised on the reproduction, distribution and circulation of images and symbols, nor on where and by whom they are seen and preserved.

The scenes of the toppling and destruction of the statues of Saddam immediately bring to mind other historical expressions of iconoclasm, whose 'victims' in modern times included Stalin, Hitler and Chiang Kai-shek. In the case of the recent iconoclasm in Iraq, however, it becomes particularly clear that our ability to witness it is by the grace of and through our passion for photographic images. Paradoxically, it is through the image that we experience iconoclasm. Images, products of our iconolatry and mania for images, endow the expressions of iconoclasm with maximum visibility. The destruction of images guarantees the production of images.

Images also become icons themselves – or idols, depending on one's point of view – that can be deployed as weapons in today's political, cultural and religious battlefields. To an increasing degree, wars also take place at the level of the image. The photograph of the toppling of the statue of Saddam on Firdous Square in Baghdad, for example, functions as an iconic image with regard to a particular phase of the war in Iraq and governs how it is represented and perceived. But at the same time it is doubtful whether an image that is itself an icon can indeed function as an objective representation of iconoclasm. Does not such an image always refer to itself rather than provide a view of reality?

In order to attain more insight into the complex relationship between iconoclasm, iconolatry, image and spectator, the French philosopher Bruno Latour introduced the notion of 'iconoclash'. [2] We can say there is an iconoclash between spectator and image when 'a profound and disturbing uncertainty exists concerning the role, power, status, danger and violence of an image or representation', says Latour. The iconic photograph of the iconoclasm directed against Saddam seems, then, to be a case of an intensified iconoclash operating at various levels: a 'clash' between (the status of) the photograph and what is depicted gives rise to iconoclashes between the viewer and the photographic image, as well as between the viewer and what is depicted. This must indeed have consequences for the public and political value of image and reality. What the image shows has happened, but the actual implications and intentions of image and event remain vague.

Decades ago, Jean Baudrillard described the image as the site of the disappearance of meaning, information and representation. After 9 / 11 he even wondered to what extent certain photographs have not become a parody of violence; it is no longer a question of the truth or falsity of images, but of their impact, which means that they have become an integral part of war. The image itself, as the vanishing point of reality, has become violent. [3]

Images and their effect and affect, can, however, also be judged more mildly; their violence is perhaps not purely nihilistic. Hal Foster's notion of 'traumatic realism' might offer a way out of the binary opposition that often dominates discourse about reality and representation, between the image as referential or as Baudrillarian simulacrum. According to this notion, realistic documentary images can also be read as 'referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, affective and affectless, critical and complacent'. [4] Precisely because these realistic images continue to appear time and time again and are repeated and widely distributed, they have the capacity to simultaneously protect us from, to reconcile ourselves with and to persuade us of a 'traumatic real'. Following Baudrillard,

the iconoclasm, the trauma, in *Toppled* would lie more in the images themselves than in what they show; if we follow Foster, then this is the very reason that they form a buffer against the real.

Disaster Tourism

The images from *Toppled* that Göttke selected for this issue of *Open* are amateur photographs taken by American soldiers during their mission in Iraq. The part of the *Toppled* archive that they belong to is called 'Appropriating Saddam', in which the Saddam statues or fragments of them function as objects to be photographed next to. The images reflect both a tourist attitude – 'I was there' – and expressions of superiority and the establishment of a new hierarchy: one of the photographs shows an American urinating against a remnant of a statue of Saddam, despite the sign prohibiting this.

As amateur photographs, disseminated and duplicated in the public realm via the internet, the soldiers' snapshots represent a new, emergent category of war pictures, to which the notorious photographs taken by American soldiers of Iraqi prisoners being tortured in the Abu Ghraib prison surely belong as well. These series of images, however, are similar in more ways: some of the Abu Ghraib photographs also feature the soldiers posing like tourists and appear to be intended for the home front or as souvenirs for later. The superior attitude whereby the 'foreign' or the 'other' – the Iraqi prisoners – is appropriated and to which they are subjected is fundamentally no different from the way the soldiers treat the statues.

It may not seem all that ethically correct to equate photographs of people being tortured with those of dismantled statues, and especially to make a comparison with tourist photographs. But studying and naming their shared formal and technical properties does reveal that they both emerge from a broader and egalitarian media and amusement culture. Susan Sontag pointed out that photographs of soldiers and their prisoners or war booty were formerly made as trophies to be preserved in the circumscribed space of a collection or photo album. Nowadays, says Sontag, such images are no longer 'objects' but messages to be disseminated and exchanged via the internet. [5]

The amateur photographs made by soldiers stem from popular media culture without really being able to detach themselves from it, even though what they show is so extreme or exceptional. A crucial question is how they subsequently function there, and then not at the level of representation, qua Baudrillard and the 'traumatic realism' of Foster, but at the level of their specific technical and medial definition.

Walter Benjamin proposed that the function of film and other modern media at the beginning of the last century was to teach people how to deal with the shock effects of urban modernity. Following on from this, the media theorist Richard Grusin suggests that the creation and distribution of digital images, similar to the photographs under discussion here, could be a way to disperse the shock or the traumatic affect of the war and the American presence in Iraq across media artefacts. [6] Taking the photos becomes an attempt to transfer the experience of the shock to a media memory. According to this argument, the formal and technical properties of digital photography and the internet are thus aids that enable us to cope with reality by delegating or deferring the sensation of it. The soldiers taking photographs or making films, therefore, are not appropriating reality, at least not directly, but are giving it away to an indefinite medial memory. There the images end up in an indefinable space in which every receiver / viewer is turned into a voyeur and accomplice. Just like the makers, however, they can always defer their responsibility or their involvement in the images by literally parting with them and circulating them further. In this sense, these image consumers are behaving in the same way as the soldiers / senders, that is, as an 'interpassive subject' who delegates his cognitive or perceptual occupation. [7] And by constantly rebounding the images from a personal to a public domain, they can never really be compromised.

Deepening of Iconic Memory

Are the realistic digital images, whether professional or amateur, and at the level both of representation (Foster) and their mediality (Grusin), aimed chiefly at minimalizing the traumatic effect of seeing or experiencing a shocking reality? Or has the image itself become iconoclastic (Baudrillard), resulting in a state of 'iconoclash'?

The subversive effect of *Toppled* as a shadow archive largely consists in its capacity to raise questions about images and their effect and about the way we deal with media today. It thus evokes new meanings and narratives, making revelations that relate critically to both the formal and informal sources from which it draws.

Toppled exhibits a narrative line that largely follows the chronology of the events. The captions remain close to what is depicted and are relatively straightforward and objective. But precisely because of this, space is created for the listener / viewer to arrive at interpretations of the images that are more analytical and theoretical and that cause the linear narrative structure to disintegrate.

According to experimental psychology, 'iconic memory' is a type of short term visual memory that has a great capacity but is of very short duration: memory traces of visual impressions last about half a second before they decay. Iconic memory, understood here as a cultural metaphor for the fleeting way we deal with images nowadays, is reflected in *Toppled*, particularly because of the large amount of images (more than 400) and the speed with which they pass before us. At the same time, however, it is adjusted: the duration of the memory is extended through the concentration on a thematic selection and specific arrangement of pictures: they can thus be transferred, as it were, from a short-term to a long-time memory.

Now that the public domain is getting more and more clogged up with a morbid growth of images of uncertain origin and with unclear intentions, which are produced both by the conventional news media and the new informal media, parallel and experimental shadow archives like *Toppled* are of crucial importance. Not in order to bring us closer to the truth, but to guarantee forms and places of alternative publicity and signification. And to safeguard the image as a potential source of historical knowledge in both its aesthetic and political dimensions.

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Footnotes

1. To get an impression of the project, not all of which is online, see http://www.Toppledsaddam.org/Toppled.html.
2. Bruno Latour, 'What is Iconoclash? Or is there a world beyond the image wars', in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Cambridge, ma: mit Press, 2002).
3. Jean Baudrillard, 'War Porn', in: *The Conspiracy of Art* (Cambridge, ma: Semiotext(e) /mit Press, 2005), 205-210.
4. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, ma: mit Press, 1996), 130. On this aspect see also Kari Anden-Papadopoulus, 'The Trauma of Representation. Visual Culture, Photojournalism and the September 11 Terrorist Attack', http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/32/32_089-104. pdf (accessed on 24 July 2007).
5. Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', *New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004.
6. Lecture by Richard Grusin, 'Affect, Mediality, and Abu Ghraib'. See http://www.unibg.it/dati/corsi/3025/13365-Abu%20Ghraib--Ljubljana-Bergamo2nda%20versione.pdf. For the illustrations: http://www.unibg.it/dati/corsi/3025/13399-Abu%20Ghraib--Bergamopowerpoint.pdf (accessed on 24 July 2007).
7. Slavoj Žižek, 'The Interpassive Subject', http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-the-interpassive-subject.html (accessed on 24 July 2007).

Tags

Image, Media Society, Memory

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