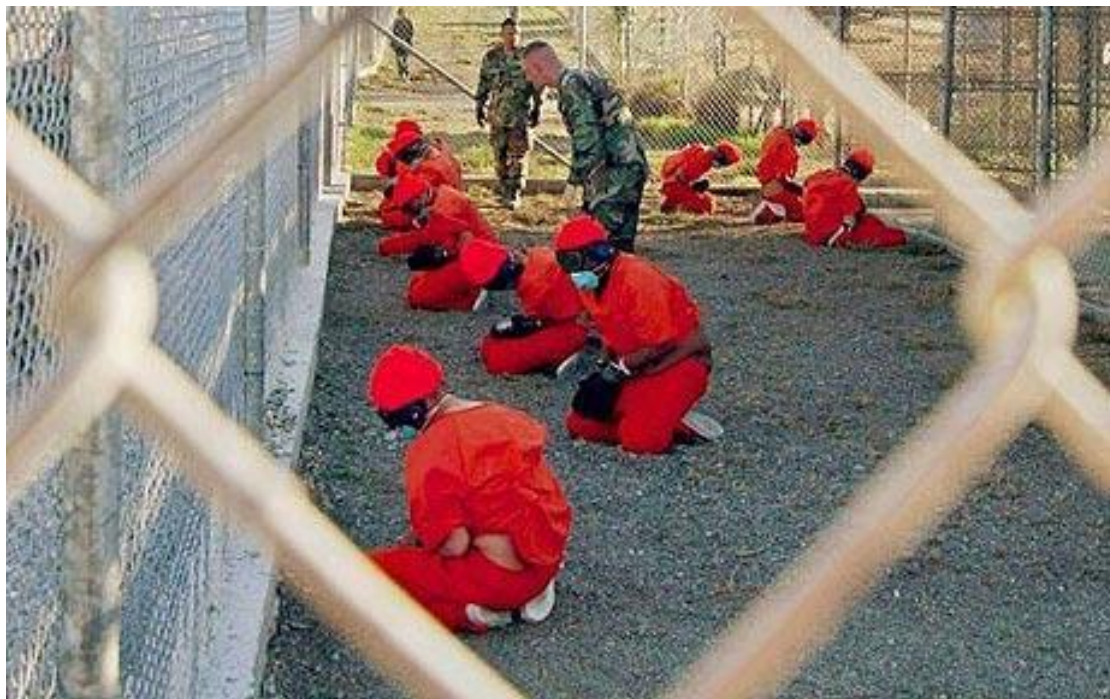


## Bureaucracy and Crime: Photography at Guantánamo

Julian Stallabrass

We should continue to remember—if we are US citizens—what our government has done, or if we are British, Polish, Romanian or Italian, what our governments have been actively complicit in: kidnapping, illegal imprisonment, torture and murder. The US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (itself founded at the beginning of the twentieth century as an exercise of imperial power) houses the prison camp which was designed as the public face of ‘the war on terror’. The camp was a gigantic photo-op, staged to produce images of power. The notorious photographs of the first orange-jump-suited detainees, kneeling, blind, on the ground, were naked propaganda, made to petrify the opposition. Terror against terror.



It was far from being the only place, or the worst, where supposed enemies were held, tortured and disposed of—there were many others run directly by US personnel in Iraq, Afghanistan and (with British cooperation) in the military base on Diego Garcia, and probably in many other nations; there were others still where prisoners were ‘rendered’ to face torture and death in Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. Even on the figures admitted to by the US military, only four per cent of prisoners in the American Gulag were held at Guantánamo.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the sight of the media,

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<sup>1</sup> Clive Stafford Smith, *Bad Men: Guantanamo Bay and the Secret Prisons*, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, London 2007, p. 230. For Britain and Diego Garcia, see pp. 246-7.

beyond the reach of the law and the help of bodies such as the International Red Cross and Amnesty International, those victims were truly naked and powerless before the might of a ruthless and enraged state, glorying in its might.

Notoriously, in the attempt to put them beyond the protection of the Geneva Convention, those seized and taken to Guantánamo were not considered to be prisoners of war. The attraction of the naval base was its apparent remove from national law, since it was neither a part of the US nor, by dint of force, of Cuba. The prisoners of Guantánamo were at least logged as individuals, and after the 2004 Supreme Court judgement that US law did apply in a place where the US state exercised 'complete jurisdiction and control', were allowed access to lawyers. Unlike the prisoners of the black sites, they came to have names, nationalities, histories, families, friends and supporters. The fact that Guantánamo was the public face of the American gulag gave some inmates limited protection. Seymour Hersh relates the confession of an anonymous Marine who told how soldiers were encouraged to 'visit' prisoners to beat them (often when the press was taking a lunch break) but had to hold back for fear of causing too visible an injury.<sup>2</sup>

All this did not mean that others were not harshly treated. The prison was divided into various camps (Delta, Echo, X-Ray and others), descending circles of hell, and the lower tiers remained unlit by the tools of publicity and propaganda. Here is Philippe Sands' account of the condition of Mohammed al-Qahtani in December 2002, at the time when the memo, approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, authorising harsh interrogation techniques arrived at the camp. It is based on the official interrogation logs recorded by his captors:

Detainee 063 had been separated from all other detainees and put in isolation on 8 August, nearly four months earlier. He was dehydrated and in need of regular hook-ups to an intravenous drip to give him liquid replenishment. His feet were swollen, he was constipated and forced to take enemas. He urinated on himself. He watched a video of 9/11, with the volume turned up loud, very loud. Pictures of 9/11 victims were taped to the walls of the interrogation room, and to his body. The air conditioning system was being turned on and off to vary the temperature. A German Shepherd named Zeus kept close watch. The interrogators told Detainee 063 that the 'onion strategy' would be

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<sup>2</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, Allen Lane, London 2004, p. 12.

applied to him. He would be stripped of all control over his life, layer by layer.<sup>3</sup>

Such treatment was part of a general regime of disorientation, humiliation and disinformation, which included sleep deprivation, stress positions, sexual taunts, and threats to victims' families.<sup>4</sup> There are many accounts of such abuse, amid a haze of claim and counter-claim. As Sidney Blumenthal points out, it is hard to know how to authenticate such accounts but that difficulty is a result of the very system of illegality that made them: 'In the absence of the due process of law, denied to abductees in the floating netherworld of this gulag, absolutely nothing can be "authenticated"'.<sup>5</sup> We do have the state's own records (which must count as the minimum of that which it is guilty), along with accounts from FBI and military personnel who, far from being anti-US, are horrified patriots: these witnesses have gone on public record, recounting the torture and sexual humiliation that they witnessed, which included female interrogators rubbing their genitals in front of prisoners and smearing them with liquid that they were told was menstrual blood.<sup>6</sup>

While the prison camp generated photographs and video for the outside world, it also used them internally as weapons in interrogation. Of al-Qahtani once again, this time directly from the official log:

0030: Lead entered booth and observed that detainee appeared troubled. [...] Detainee then address the following problems to lead: 1. Being subjected to pictures of swimsuit models and questioning. – he began to cry quietly at this point. 2. Metal chair is too stiff and uncomfortable. 3. The overall treatment here. He cannot handle the treatment much longer. - when he made this statement he began to cry and sob out loud. Lead asked him if he had any other problems and he stated that the other problems he could deal with on his own. Ie: physical pain, sleeping arrangement etc. What he could not deal with much longer were his being subjected to the pictures and the treatment day after day. Lead then began to explain why he was being subjected to the following: 1. The pictures: 2. Metal chair: 3. Treatment: Lead then began a futility approach on detainee and stated that he has chosen this lifestyle. The "attention to detail" approach began. Lead pulled pictures of swimsuit models off detainee and told him the test of his

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<sup>3</sup> Philippe Sands, *Torture Team: Deception, Cruelty and the Compromise of Law*, Allen Lane, London 2008, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Sands, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, *How Bush Rules: Chronicles of a Radical Regime*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Blumenthal, p. 194.

ability to answer questions would begin. Detainee refused to answer and finally stated that he would after lead poured water over detainees head and was told he would be subjected to this treatment day after day. Detainee was told to think about his decision to answer questions. Lead would only ask questions if detainee fully cooperated with lead.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Qahtani was repeatedly shown photographs of scantily dressed women, along with images of 9/11, particularly pictures of children who had died that day, had the pictures taped to his body, and to ensure that he had paid them close attention, he was induced to answer questions about them. As in the log record for 12.30am, if he failed to comply, he would suffer punishment. In public and in secret, then, photographs and videos are used by the US military as 'force multipliers', soft adjuncts to the use of physical force, to intimidate and humiliate. As in Abu Ghraib, the use of photography as an instrument of war extended to depicting the prisoners. At Abu Ghraib, notoriously, it was an unofficial though logical extension of the sexual and physical humiliation of prisoners; at Guantánamo, official video recordings were made of the regular beatings administered by the Emergency Reaction Force, though the state has since had these destroyed.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>7</sup> Secret ORCON: Interrogation Log Detainee 063, 23 December 2002.

[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Secret\\_ORCON:\\_Interrogation\\_Log\\_Detainee\\_063](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Secret_ORCON:_Interrogation_Log_Detainee_063)

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the motives of the Abu Ghraib torturers and photographers, see Philip Gourevitch/ Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story*, Picador, London 2008.

Against such overt and extreme abuses of power, and the rallying of photographic images to the 'war on terror', Edmund's Clark's response is quiet, composed and restrained—even classical. His photographs of the Guantánamo prisons bear many similarities with his previous work, taken in quite different circumstances, in a wing for elderly lifers in a Portsmouth gaol.<sup>9</sup> In both, there is a concentration on the architecture of the prisons and on still life arrangements of objects. In both, 'still life' becomes a reflection on lives stilled. In Guantánamo, where so many prisoners spent prolonged periods in solitary confinement, Clark's meticulous attention to his surroundings reflects that forced on the inmates. His photographs of the cells there take on an added layer of intensity: much prison architecture is angular, unyielding and brutal, a reflection of the ideology as well as the function of detainment, but in Guantánamo the décor also served the purposes of torture: the glaring blankness of the over-lit walls and the lack of visual incident serving to increase the boredom, disorientation and sensory deprivation of those trapped there. Clark's minders and censors permitted the publication of pictures that include mobile force-feeding chairs, floor rings for shackling prisoners in stress positions, and other apparatus of repression, but there is much that cannot be seen. These largely unpeopled images are depictions of the backdrops against which all that could not be photographed took place, including the use of cold, heat, noise and isolation, and the disruption of sleeping and eating patterns.

Once again, set against such an abuse of power, the default mode of museum photography—of large-format cameras (or in Guantánamo, a digital equivalent so that the censors could immediately vet the results), of highly controlled and considered, laborious image-making is at first sight an odd one. It is one type of critical response to the standard operations of photojournalism, fixed on the dramatic incident or gesture (fingers curling through a link-chain fence, for example), on faces and expressions, and on the attempt to capture in a single image the current moment for immediate consumption in the news media, and for a few chosen images to stand in for a particular time in the history of the victors. Against such practices, and this is an equally standard art-world response, figures are rarely seen and faces never, architecture is favoured over incident, the viewer is never instructed where to look by the use of differential focus, and because there is no action, there is little sense of timeliness, let alone newsworthiness.

This type of museum photography came to the fore in the 1990s, particularly through the work of members of the Düsseldorf School, which included Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth. Their lenses were

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Clark, *Still Life Killing Time*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport 2007.

turned, at least initially, on the spectacle of regulated work and leisure in factories, stock market floors, libraries, shopping malls, galleries and fairs, and presented to the viewer a remote view of the quiet Weberian nightmare of administered and bureaucratized life. Their meticulous photographic techniques, in which for example perspective controls of the view camera were used to ensure that the rectangle of the frame ran exactly parallel to the vertical and horizontal lines of the subject, was itself an enactment of regulation. Rather than oppose administered life with rebellious expressivity, they confronted it with an excess of conformity.

It is logical to apply these means to prison and army life since they represent the extreme end of bureaucratization under which most aspects of life are surrendered to regulation. This is as true for the guards as the inmates. An extract from Camp Delta's Standard Operating Procedure:

### **13-6. Mail Screening**

- a. All mail will be processed through the DMPC then forwarded electronically to the JDOG S-2 for screening.
- b. Cleared Mail. Mail that has been screened by JDOG S2, authorized delivery, and stamped with JDOG S2 approved stamp controlled by S2.
- c. Exploited/Forwarded mail. Any mail that has been designated to have INTEL/OPSEC value beyond the normal mail process will be notated in PINK and disseminated appropriately.
- d. Hold Mail. Mail that is deemed undeliverable for Intelligence and/or OPSEC standards. Mail that is designated to be placed only in a detainee's mail file. Hold Mail will be notated in YELLOW. If JDOG S-2 places a permanent Hold on a piece of mail it will NOT be sent out or given to the detainee (Refer to section 13-8).
- e. Redacted mail. A redaction is to strike through, cross out, or remove a portion of a letter or message that violates Intelligence and/or OPSEC standards. Redact Mail will be notated in ORANGE.
  - (1). Incoming mail redact. A copy of the original mail item and a translation is made from DOCEX. The front of the copy is annotated, "REDACT." The translation section to be redacted is noted in orange and both the copy of the original mail item and the translation are forwarded to translation. Once the copies of the mail item return from translation, the original mail item is logged out from the DMPC for redaction. The redacted sections will be noted in orange on the original mail item and a copy will be made with the redacted sections marked out in either black or blue ink. All ICRC will have the original redacted according to policy. Once redaction is completed, the mail item will be

annotated in DOCEX as “CLEARED-Redact Completed,” then logged back into the DMPC for further processing (Refer to section 13-8).<sup>10</sup>

That interest would take us from Weber to Foucault who, of course, took his analyses of the interrelation of knowledge and power to a discussion of strictly regulated institutions, including asylums and prisons.<sup>11</sup> Yet here, Clark claims, the focus on detail and the exclusion of faces (and, largely, bodies) serves to bring about an identification with the detainees, not as Afghans, Iraqis or Arabs, and not as Muslim males, but simply as human. The close focus on the environment of the prison, when juxtaposed with an examination of the circumstances made for and by the prisoners on their release, when finally they can exercise some control over their surroundings, lets the viewer see all that they have in common (armchairs, cushions, net curtains, wash items) and to begin to imagine the mental consequences brought about by the total lack of control over such things. Thomas Hirschhorn made a similar claim about his work, *The Incommensurable Banner* (2007), a large montage of photographs of the worst that modern munitions can do to the human body. Here too, identity is stripped away—the viewer has no idea whether the corpses are civilians, resistance fighters or soldiers—reduced as they have become by the weapons of terror, whether wielded by the state or its opponents, to a fleshy sludge. Both Clark and Hirschhorn find a universal humanity in the body, one asking the viewer to imagine its response to a variety of unyielding and accommodating spaces, the other directly showing its destruction.

This contrast illustrates the confluence of violence and regulation which marks so many areas of capitalist life, most starkly in prisons and the military. CBU-52B, CBU-58A/B, CBU-59B, CBU-71/B, CBU-72, CBU-87... the baldly bureaucratic names describe the varieties of cluster bomb used by the US armed forces. Clark, in showing prisons, the naval base's homes and leisure facilities, and the homes that prisoners go to on their release, sets up not just contrasts but also affinities between them. Suburbia offers no complete escape from violence, regulation and confinement, and homes protected from prying eyes and intruders can also take on some of the aspects of prison. This is equally true of the homes of the military. Sitting strangely as an enclave of American consumer society against the Cuban landscape and in utter contrast to the society that lies beyond its boundary, the base is a somewhat cheaper,

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<sup>10</sup> Headquarters, Joint Task Force - Guantanamo (JTF-GTMO), Guantanamo Bay, Cuba: Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedure, 1 March 2004. <http://file.wikileaks.org/file/gitmo-sop-2004.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage, New York 1979; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Writings and Other Interviews 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon, New York, 1980.

uglier and less adorned version of US suburbia, in which displays of social distinction are more strictly regulated. The close connection between regulated working life and equally ordered leisure and consumption activities is made brilliantly clear in the picture of Ronald McDonald, imprisoned by railings and captured through the grid of the eatery window.

The book also contains long sections reproducing correspondence to one of the British detainees, Omar Deghayes. He was not allowed to see the original letters and postcards but was provided with photocopies (generally in black and white) bearing the marks of censors. The granting and withdrawal of mail, copying in colour or black and white, and the degree to which the correspondence was censored, were used as levers to try to ensure the prisoner's compliance. Here bureaucracy and force come into direct contrast with what, at least for a prisoner, must have seemed to be utopian ideals and subject matter: words of solidarity, many of them from strangers, and images of all that he was disbarred from seeing: beautiful landscapes, tourist destinations, pets and other charismatic animals, and works of art. A child, Mursal, send Deghayes a drawing of flowers, a tree and the shining sun which reads simply 'I am Free!' Directly marked by the military bureaucracy, these messages could not perhaps be so simply enjoyed: it seems strange to send a Muslim, imprisoned in a religious war, Christmas cards, let alone one that reads 'Sexy Leslie and Brian. From our romantic holiday'. The latter, if not written by some PsyOps officer, was chosen for delivery by an administration committed to the mental destruction of its prisoners. Even so, seen beyond the prison walls, these impoverished and censored reproductions do provide an opening to the wider world of disgust, opposition, solidarity and sympathy that the revelation of the gulag brought about.

The other striking element of these images, set against the alliance of bureaucracy and violence, is religion—both of the inmates and the guards. Religious belief pointed to something higher than the regulated life that both shared, and for some may have made sense of their situation. Some prisoners and guards saw themselves as sacrificing their lives (through separation from families and other loved ones, for instance) for a greater cause. Religion binds many of the prisoners, guards and letter writers. Clark offers stark images of religion bound by force and finance: the prayer mat caged in a steel mesh, the pathetic Madonna faced by empty loungers, or the display of knots resting on an air-conditioning unit that reads 'Jesus' in a pallid attempt to ameliorate a cheap and ugly environment.



Clark's obsessive concentration on 'still life', and on fixing objects in a composition, echoes that of solitary prisoners, forced to dwell on their bare surroundings, to coerce them into making sense and so to take some power over them. As we have seen, the photographer enacts regulation in his strict compositions. The aesthetic ordering of ugly regulation produces a synthesis in which beauty is bent to bureaucracy and ugliness seems ordered by a higher power. The results point in two apparently incompatible directions: towards a conservative hope of redemption in which the ideal may be found everywhere, and which fits snugly with the comforts of religion; and towards the ordering of blank, inexpressive surfaces in modernist aesthetics—in monochrome canvases, sculpture and architecture—in which there is an embrace of the world of the office and the filing cabinet as beautiful by its very orderliness. The two ideals may share more than at first appears, since the supposedly redemptive potential of the individual artistic sensibility is a secular variant on the religious attachment to a higher power.

Yet in Clark's vision that idealist current is subterranean, submerged by the bleakness of the subject matter and the strict regulation of composition. The ideal is seen as fragile—the clichéd beauty of the postcards is spoiled by dirty looking photocopies and censors' marks and stamps; the security of our normal credit-card driven lives and of our homes is set against the image of the lawless state that may still seize anyone. The Bush regime was different

from its predecessors and its successor only in the flagrant way in which it breached international law, and in its levels of corruption and incompetence. Clark's still images, in deliberate opposition to the news, present a series of conditions which seem in their stasis to be permanent fixtures. There is much force to this view, as the crusade continues unabated and opposition in the UK and the US has faltered.



This book, in the sections that look at letters, recollections and ex-prisoners' homes, deals with British citizens who were imprisoned at Guantánamo. It has recently been revealed that, while the British government publicly expressed mild disapproval of extra-legal measures put in place there by the US, it actively connived to have its own citizens delivered there.<sup>12</sup> In the photograph of the empty table kept in the navy canteen to symbolise those missing in action, part of explanation reads:

*A slice of lemon is on the bread plate to remind us of their bitter fate.  
Remember!*

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<sup>12</sup> There were many news stories covering Tony Blair and Jack Straw's direct role in this. See, for example, Ian Cobain, 'Government "plotted to send UK citizens to Guantánamo"', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2010.

Photography can serve as a tool of remembrance and imagination which (with the words of the prisoners) may give us some insight into the details of subjection to the demands of 'foreign policy' as directed at the state's own citizens. Its bitterness should remain in our mouths and minds until the policy changes, the crusade to impose order and universal values is abandoned, the gulag is finished, the law is followed, and those guilty of kidnap, false imprisonment, torture and murder are punished.