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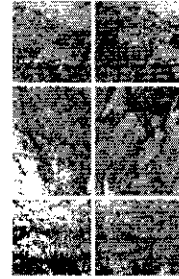
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Narratives of liberation and narratives of innocent suffering: the rhetorical uses of images of Iraqi children in the British press

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the rhetoric of pictures of Iraqi children in the British press during the 2003 UK/US invasion of Iraq. The author argues that images of children are particularly potent resources for constructing narratives about the motivations and outcomes of war. Two narratives are explored: the first is sceptical about the legality of the war but nonetheless frames its outcomes within a narrative of liberation. The second, the narrative of the innocent children, shows how the display of the children as abstracted from their social and familial context and therefore in need of adult care may be used to justify the very same military interventions that caused their injuries. The author concludes that it is not proximity or distance from the 'suffering other' that shapes whether or not their images will be circulated in the press, but the rhetorical uses of the image in contributing to particular narratives about the causes and consequences of specific events.

KEY WORDS

childhood • children • images • Iraq • news • war

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the rhetoric of pictures of Iraqi children in sections of the British press during the 2003 UK/US invasion of Iraq. I have focused on images of children because of the iconic status in Western imagery of the child as the embodiment of innocence and playfulness and hope for the future (Lutz and Collins, 1993; Holland, 1992). This iconicity means that in war reporting, images of children are critical sites on which narratives about the legitimacy, justification and outcomes of war are inscribed. The article explores the significance of the different types of images selected by the

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tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mirror* and the broadsheet, *The Guardian*. While the *Daily Mirror* was consistently anti-war, *The Guardian* was sceptical about the war's legality and aims of the war but ambivalent about the likely outcomes for the Iraqi people. These differences were reflected in the narratives that were, in part, produced through the selection of particular images. *The Guardian's* images produced a narrative of liberation in which children who had previously been alone were now protected and provided for by the British government, represented by British soldiers. The pictures that the *Daily Mirror* used told a different story. In these images, the attempts of Iraqi adults to protect and provide for their children are destroyed by the invasion. Pictures of Iraqi children are used in *The Guardian* to reassure its readers that what is being done 'in their name' will have a favourable outcome for innocent Iraqis, it is only 'bad' Iraqis (soldiers, insurgents, the regime) that will be the targets of war. The images used in the *Daily Mirror* offered no such reassurance to its readers; rather, they displayed the pain and suffering imposed on Iraqi children 'In Your Name' (*Daily Mirror* picture caption, 24 March 2003).

CAPTURING THE REAL: THE STATUS OF WAR PHOTOGRAPHY

In 1995, Baudrillard's highly controversial text, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, was published in English. The core of his argument was that the available images of the war, the spectacle of 'shock and awe', reduced the war to a simulacrum. Baudrillard's conviction that the gap between the real and the referent has effectively erased the referent is, perhaps, the logical conclusion to the growing interest in how photographs are made rather than captured. If post-structuralism has launched a theoretical attack on the veracity of the photograph, the increasing use in everyday life of digital cameras and growing awareness among people of the ease with which the digital image can be manipulated has weakened belief 'in the photograph as a reliable record of reality' (Hammond, 2003: 30). However, awareness that the image is made, both at the moment that the picture is framed and in its subsequent development, has not entirely undermined that special quality of the photograph that Barthes (1977: 30) referred to, the sense of 'being there': photographs, particularly news photographs, are still widely seen as documentary proof (Taylor, 1995: 122). So, in a discussion of photographs circulating after September 11, Andén-Papadopoulos (2003) can claim that 'the photograph is a trace, or index, which makes up a material, physical and thus extremely potent connection between image and referent'. The British government's insistence that the IRA provide photographs of their disposal of weapons makes sense precisely through this presumed connection between the real and the image. It is because the photograph is viewed as evidence of the event or a trace of the object that photographs of war zones are so important in the struggle between different agents (government, military, opposition) to control the narrative of war.

THE GOVERNANCE OF WAR REPORTING

The perspective of the state

Since Vietnam, governments have been acutely conscious of the need to manage the reporting of war. Whether photojournalism did or did not play a significant role in ending the Vietnam War, the US government has a general belief that it 'lost' the battle for controlling the representation of the war in news reporting (Carter and Weaver, 2003: 24; Keeble, 2001: 98). During the Falklands War, the British government sought not to repeat their error through the use of 'deception, misinformation, disinformation and media manipulation' (Young and Jesser, 1997: 98). The House of Commons Defence Committee Report (1982) on 'The Handling of Press and Public Information during the Falklands Conflict' claimed that news management was acceptable since the national interest lay in winning the war, that uncensored pictures of the 'harsh realities of war' would lower morale at home and that the press should exercise 'good taste and tone' so as not to offend the families of soldiers (Taylor, 1995: 172). By 1991, 'governments and military organisations had learned how to incorporate news professionals into the armed forces, thus setting up a high measure of control without the need to invoke legislation' (p. 172). The lessons of Vietnam and of British experience in the Falklands led the US to develop 'constraints for media coverage of its operations in Grenada and Panama, before deploying them most successfully during the Gulf War of 1990–91' and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 (Campbell, 2003: 59). Both the British and the US military used the press pool system in the 1991 Gulf War to control which journalists would get access to daily briefings and sites of conflict (Carter and Weaver, 2003: 25). The pooling system was used by the military to enforce delays in the transmission of news. In the 2003 invasion, the system of embedding journalists gave the military even tighter control over how the war was represented (Hammond, 2003: 23–36).

Although the British government has sought to manage the press through controlling access to the conflict and giving officially approved journalists enhanced access by embedding them with troops, most of the censorship of war reporting is self-censorship by journalists and editors (Keeble, 1998: 68; Fisk, 2001).

The ethics of photojournalism

If awareness at theoretical and practical levels of how the photograph can be manipulated has not entirely erased the notion that the image tells it like it is, there still remains an understanding that particular images should not be circulated.¹ Indeed, the representation of violent acts or events is somehow taken to be more obscene than the event itself. The representation of violence, pain and suffering as news, if it is to avoid charges of sensationalism or even indecency, has to be justified as being in the public interests. The pictures of Iraqi POWs being tortured by US soldiers could be circulated

because the public has a right to know. Ordinary images of war, on the other hand, are thought to merely reiterate what the public already knows: that war is bloody and violent, and involves death, pain and suffering. Thus Lindsay Nicholson (2003), writing in the Media Guardian (separate media section of *The Guardian*), asks: 'when did it become OK to fill page after page of every newspaper with these most dreadful images. Pictures of murder and mutilation not just of soldiers (although that's bad enough) but of civilians and little children?' Her objections are widely shared. David Morrison's (1992) research into television audiences found that 'very few people really wish for the full horror of war to be shown on their screens' (p. 31, cited in Taylor, 1995: 173). This was not because 'they did not want to know what went on in war but that they did not need to see very explicit images of death and injury to believe that a hideous incident had taken place' (p. 173).

What constitutes the limits of 'taste' and 'decency' is contextual, and both the context of the event being depicted and the context of the sensibilities of particular audiences shape what kinds of images will be selected. Simpson's comment on the selection of agency pictures in Sarajevo makes clear national differences in perceptions of audience's sensibilities:

A camera crew from the agency 'pool', whose pictures could be used by everyone, arrived first and saw the immediate results of the massacre [a mortar bomb attack on a Sarajevo street] . . . The Italians used almost all of them: the brains, the intestines, the gutter literally running with blood in the rain. The French used the gutter and the bodies. The Americans used the gutter. We [the British] used none of these things: just the covered bodies being put into the ambulances, the empty pram, the abandoned shoes. (Simpson, 1993: 104, cited in Petley, 2003: 73)

British reporting of civilian deaths in war, as this quote implies, tends to look away from the impact of war on bodies, and replace the destruction of people with the destruction of objects. If civilian deaths in war are erased from view, 'the fighting, running, resting, eating, laughing, dying soldier' (Huppauf, 1995: 101) continues to be a central object of war photography. War is an exception to the general rule that images of the suffering other are more explicit the further away from the viewer they are imagined to be (Taylor, 1995: 157–92). The different logic of reporting war and reporting disaster goes some way to explain why *The Guardian* printed pictures of dead children and their grieving parents in its reports from the Tsunami disaster in South East Asia, but in its reports on the war in Iraq there is not a single image of a dead child and parents are absent from every picture of an injured child.

If the limits of good taste and decency are shaped by the context of the event and the perceived sensibilities of domestic audiences, the context of the image also changes over time. In 2003, *The Guardian* printed several

graphic pictures taken in the 1991 war against Iraq. These pictures were not printed in 1991 on the justification that they would offend the sensibilities of readers. As the eventual printing of these pictures makes clear:

... alternative images to those released and broadcast are captured all the time ... even embedded cameramen have recorded shocking images of wars effects that counter the clean narratives of surgical strikes. The problem is that the media industry itself operates in terms of codes and norms that mesh with the military's restrictions and prevent the public release of such images by invoking conceptions of 'taste' and 'decency'. (Campbell, 2003: 64)

THE ICONIC FIGURE OF THE CHILD

If the governance of war reporting in general attempts to limit the circulation of images of death and injury with the justification that such images offend the limits of taste and decency, then this is particularly heightened in the case of images of children. In most reporting, images of suffering children, while hardly absent from news media, are framed within narratives of rescue. Usually, images of dead or dying children are shown in the context of a natural disaster, such as appeared throughout the British press following the Tsunami disaster, and implicitly – or, in the Tsunami case explicitly – form part of a narrative in which the viewer can help to rescue the child or other, similar, children by making demands on their own government 'to do something' or by donating money to a relevant charity. (As we shall see, this narrative of rescue was also present in particular reports from Iraq, especially around exceptional cases like Ali Ishamel Abbas.)

The child as a figure in Western, and increasingly global, discourse is inscribed with innocence and vulnerability, demanding the protection and care of adults. The ideal childhood is a 'privileged domain of spontaneity, play, freedom, and emotion' (Stephens, 1995: 6). This construction of childhood while specific to the contours of Western capitalism and modernity has been globalized through such instruments as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Childhoods that are lived outside this Romantic discourse are typically described as 'lost', 'stolen' or 'denied'. It is the responsibility of adults to produce the spaces within which children are 'segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world and protected from social danger' (Boyden, 1990: 191). The child, understood to be closer to nature than to culture, exists in an uneasy tension in the space between adults' desire to socialize and enculturate children and their regret that children have to be initiated into society and culture. In their successful acquisition of culture and sociality, they lose their closeness to nature, their lack of artifice, and their spontaneity. If the child as a figure of redemption forms part of the Christian iconography of Christ the child, the move into culture and society is a constant retelling of the story of Adam and Eve's fall from Grace and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Jenks, 2005: 72).

The adults' role is not only to care for children but to care for and protect the ideal of childhood as a space and time separate from the adult world. This responsibility to care for children and childhood is formative of being an adult, it sets the boundaries between what it means to be a (responsible, caring, proper) adult and what it means to be a child. As such, the responsibility of care extends beyond particular children to children in general.

The general acceptance in everyday life that adults have a responsibility to care for children is reflected in the continuing use in fundraising appeals of children, usually children alone, as the suffering subject. The slogan 'a hungry child has no politics' used during the Ethiopian famine in 1984 is illustrative of the notion that children live outside the nexus of political calculation. Erica Burman (1994), in her discussion of images of children in Third World emergencies, notes that images of children reproduce 'the dynamic of abstracting children from their historical, cultural and political location' (p. 239). The corollary of this exemption or exclusion of children from politics is that the duty of care that adults have towards children should not be limited by the calculation of political or national interest.

The figure of the child also holds within itself, through its transformation from child to adult, the contours of the future (p. 240). The child symbolizes the possibilities of redemption and progress. The symbolism of the child as the future unfolding makes the figure of the child a potent resource for constructing narratives about collective futures and, in particular, the future of the nation (Hendrick, 1990: 51). Just as the nation is often imagined as the family and talked about in familial metaphors (the mother land), the fate of the child, a role that is central to the production of family, is collapsed into the fate of the nation. The figure of the child becomes particularly potent in periods of political upheaval when it may symbolize the birth of a new nation, either following a period of colonial rule or expressing a rupture with the previous regime. The innocence of the child, its exclusion from political calculus, and its universal appeal to adults' duty of care makes it a useful symbol with which to obscure questions about in whose interest the new nation/regime comes to power.

NARRATIVES OF LIBERATION

The Guardian while opposed to the war, and sceptical about the motivations of the UK and US governments in invading Iraq, nonetheless anticipated a favourable outcome for the Iraqi people in the event that the war succeeded in overthrowing the incumbent regime. *The Guardian* framed the war as both legally compromised and yet ethically defensible. How this stance on the war was played out in its pictorial coverage of Iraqi children is shown clearly in these and other images reproduced in the newspaper during the official period of active hostilities.

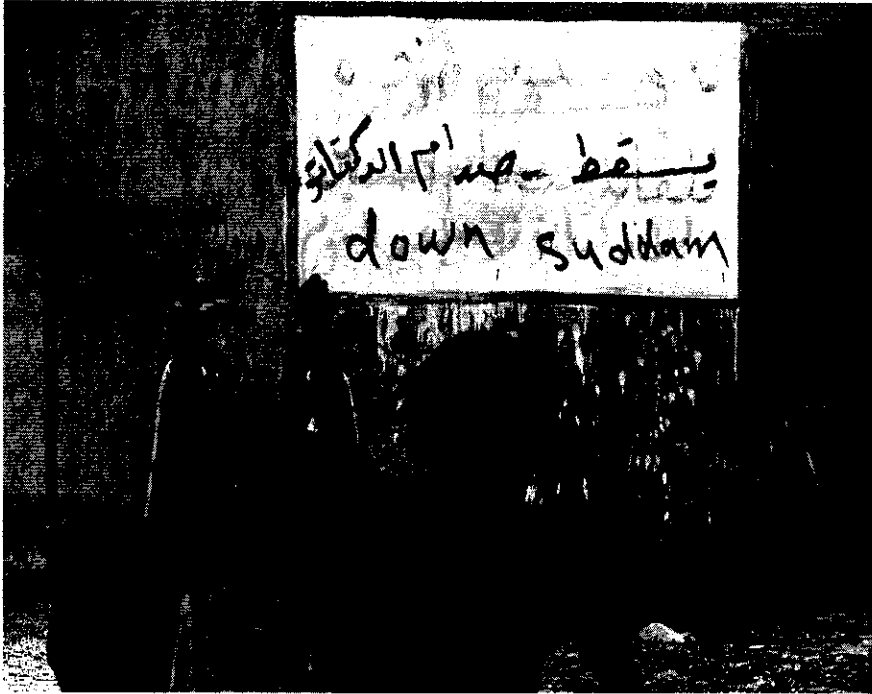


Figure 1 Photo from *The Guardian* (12 April 2003) appearing with the caption 'Children play in Shaiba'. © Dan Chung, *Children of the War*/Guardian Newspapers Ltd 2003. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2 Photo from *The Guardian* (11 March 2003) appearing with the caption 'Children on Iraqi tank: children clamber onto a tank abandoned by fleeing Iraqi troops in the town of Tuz Khurmatu, south of Kirkuk'. © Kevin Frayer/AP. Reproduced with permission of Empics.



Figure 3 Photo from *The Guardian* (26 March 2003) appearing with the caption 'Taking the long view: in this image from video, an Iraqi youth in Umm Qasr looks through binoculars belonging to a Royal Marine'. ©AP/Pool. Reproduced with permission of Empics.

In these images can be seen a clear message that the war has left innocent Iraqis unscathed. Children in these images embody the innocence of Iraqi civilians while the actions that they are engaged in point to the benign character of the occupation. While the youth in Umm Qasr (Figure 3) looking through the binoculars of a British soldier (the strap of which is still around the soldier's neck) is literally looking into the (spatial) distance, the distance that he is symbolically looking into is the (temporal) distance of the future. A future both tied to and made possible by the intervention of the British military, represented here by the soldier in full combat gear. Similarly another image (not shown here), taken on day 6 of the war, is of children taking food parcels from the back of a military truck overseen by two soldiers. The children's smiles in that image make it possible to read the soldiers' gaze as that of the protective parent ready to ward off danger, despite their uniforms. This scene fits well with the US and UK military strategy of claiming the war as a humanitarian gesture. As Philip Hammond (2003) notes, 'After the war, practical measures to solve chronic problems with water, food, medicine and electricity supplies appeared to take second place to the production of scenes of simulated humanitarianism for the cameras' (p. 34). The group of boys standing on an abandoned Iraqi tank (Figure 2), smiling and giving the victory salute, clearly separates (good) Iraqi civilians from (bad) Iraqi soldiers. That they are giving the victory salute, and the absence of any adults in this image, lends the agency of victory to good Iraqis rather than to the occupying army. The victory is their victory, the role of the

occupying army appears almost incidental in securing the rout of Iraqi troops. Similarly, in Figure 1, the boys running towards the camera shouting appear to be playing the role of soldiers charging into battle, certain of winning. The slogan behind them, 'Down with Saddam', anchors the image, telling the viewer whose side these children are on.

These cheerful images draw on the image of the child as a figure outside politics that can strip the war of its political calculation. Questions about the legality of the invasion and the shape of the post-war settlement, are elided in favour of a simple rendering of the war as 'a good thing' because these children are clearly happy. They are also clearly alone. In none of the images are Iraqi adults shown, the only adults present are occupying soldiers. This depiction of children as living without adult care continues in other representations of Iraqi children in *The Guardian*. Dan Chung, for example, produced a photo essay of nine pictures of Iraqi children for *The Guardian* called *Children of the War*. In none of these images are adults present and in only three of them is there more than one child in the picture. In all of the images, the pictures are closely framed in ways that would cut out other people present at the scene. Although we have no way of telling if the child or children were alone, this solitude contrasts sharply with pictures in the Arab press, some of which were used by the anti-war tabloid paper, the *Daily Mirror*, which invariably used wide-angle shots in which children were depicted in the company of other children and adults.

These images may also be contrasted with the general imagery of children in 'the south'. Generally these images, framed within the conventions of the suffering child, portray the child as passive (Burman, 1994: 241; Holland, 1992: 150). Kevin Carter's often reproduced photograph of a child crouched on the floor in the foetal position, yards away from a vulture, is typical of such images (Kleinmann and Kleinmann, 1996: 4). While images of the passive, suffering and abandoned child are present elsewhere in *The Guardian*, in these images a narrative of liberation is produced by framing the children in groups (Figures 1 to 3), either under the protective gaze of a soldier (Figure 3) or in settings that display their approval of the invasion (Figures 1 and 2).

THE INNOCENT CHILD

The child alone/the abandoned child

Photographs of groups of laughing children are iconic of happy childhood. In general, the child alone is a forlorn image. Key themes of the discourse of childhood, including the family as the ideal site of childhood, converge so that the image of the lone child symbolizes abandonment. Cutting out of the frame the adults and other children who surround the child places the viewer of the image in the role of these missing carers. Children on their own are abstracted from their culture and society. In stripping them of the social and political context of their lives, difficult questions are evaded about how war

will disrupt and shatter their families and other social networks. Their suffering becomes a consequence of the human condition, rather than an effect of specific political and military interventions (Anderson, 1988; Burman, 1994: 243). In being rescued, the abandoned child, the child alone, cannot lose the security and comfort of his or her existing networks and affective ties because, the image suggests, these are already absent from the child's life. Rather, if lone children are not rescued then they will be abandoned to their fate.

The authorization of action through an appeal for foreign aid, even foreign intervention, begins with an evocation of indigenous absence, an erasure of local voices and acts. Suffering is presented as if it existed free of local people and local worlds. The child is alone. This, of course, is not the way that disasters, illnesses, and deaths are usually dealt with in African or other non-Western societies, or, for that matter, in the West. (Kleinman and Kleinman, 1996: 7)

The wounded child: who is to blame?

'As the symbol of common humanity, a child may be the bearer of suffering with no responsibility for its causes' (Holland, 1992: 157). Yet this raises the question of who is to blame for the child's suffering. If lone children are abandoned, living without parental care, then the injuries they suffer can be blamed on the neglect of their absent parents. The object that directly caused their injury is of course a significant element in the attachment of blame but that the children were in contact with the object is at best unfortunate and, in the absence of an attribution of agency to the placing of the object, more likely to raise questions about the ability of parents to care for their children than to raise questions about who placed the object near the children.

It is a well-rehearsed technique of war reporting to substitute objects for people in describing the agents of war. In a special report by *The Guardian* staff photographer Dan Chung on *Children of the War*, we are told that 'nine-year-old Zeinab Hazed . . . lost her right leg in a bombing raid which doctors said killed 17 others, including her mother and three brothers.' We might infer from our other knowledge about the invasion that the bombing raid was carried out by US/UK forces, but this is not made explicit. Another picture in the same photo essay is a close-up of a young boy whose face is badly burned. We are told that 'Abbas is thought to have been injured as he and his sister played with gunpowder which they found near their home.' Again the agency of the US/UK military is erased in favour of the object (gunpowder) being the cause of injury.

In contrast to these images of lone children whose injuries can be traced to their own parents' neglect or lack of resources, the injured children pictured in their social/familial context invites a different response from the viewer. This is clear in the images that the *Daily Mirror* used. *The Guardian* opposed the war but viewed it as nonetheless offering a potentially liberating

outcome for Iraqis while the *Daily Mirror* focused specifically on the illegality of the invasion itself. The difference in their editorial stance explains the different use they made of available images of the war. While *The Guardian* showed injured children on their own, generally only using group images that could be framed within a discourse of liberation, the *Daily Mirror* consistently used pictures in which the injured child was shown being cared for by an Iraqi adult. Furthermore these pictures were anchored within text, both the caption and the report, that point the reader towards the attribution of blame on the invading armies. A photograph of an Iraqi man holding an injured child, for example, illustrates a story headlined, 'Not so smart bombs devastate ordinary lives'. 'Here was clear proof', it continues 'that America and Britain are unleashing their violence on ordinary civilians', while Figure 4 ('INNOCENT') was included in a story headlined 'Images to explode myths of war'. The report suggests that:

We are not being given the full truth. We see screaming babies in ramshackle hospitals, stripped bare of supplies by a dozen years of medicine sanctions, and we despair at the lie that this war is a humanitarian mission to help a stricken people. We see innocent civilians killed and maimed in their dilapidated homes, and we just don't know why it is happening in our name.



Figure 4 Photo from the *Daily Mirror* (24 March 2003), appearing with the caption 'INNOCENT: A child burned during the bombing of Baghdad screams in pain'. © AP. Reproduced with permission of Empics.

Rescuing the innocent child

Representations of children have a very specific place in the iconography of war. Unlike images of adults that are inscribed into discourses of moral blame and political calculation, images of children may be fitted into a universalizing discourse. In such a discourse, 'the world's children' should be protected from the conflicts of adults (extending from parental conflict through to international conflict), and deserve the care and concern of any adult, regardless of their national or political allegiances.

'Images of suffering children have long been used to personify injustice, in part because children signify vulnerability, dependence and innocence' (Thorne, 2003: 261) A discourse of childhood in which the child is always innocent, an innocence that is both cause and consequence of their abstraction from a social and political context, renders images of children injured or killed in war particularly problematic for a narrative of liberation. One response to this problematic, as discussed earlier, is to frame the child as being alone, so that the child's injury becomes a consequence of neglect rather than attack. An alternative response is to position children's injuries as an exceptional, unforeseen and certainly unintended outcome of war. While the agents of 'our side's' military violence are routinely erased in representations of war, 'our' agency in rescuing the child from these unintended consequences is highlighted in more or less dramatic ways.

The news reports of Ali Ishamel Abbas, a 12-year-old boy, illustrate this narrative of rescue, which continues to be played out as a mythic version of the war's impact and its consequences. Ali Abbas was injured in a coalition attack on Baghdad in March 2003 in which 14 members of his family were killed. As a result of the attack, he lost both arms and his body was so burned that it seemed likely that he would die. The report on his situation was first run by *El Pais* on 1 April and then by a Reuters correspondent on 6 and 7 April:

Only a few hours after Samia Nakhoul, the Gulf bureau chief for Reuters, filed her story 'it was already apparent that the small boy with the beautiful face and the uncanny knack for unbearably poignant soundbites was set to become one of the iconic figures of Gulf War II'. (Addley, 2003)

Within days, several British tabloid newspapers had launched appeals. An evacuation to Kuwait by the US military was organized following the intervention of an Australian journalist, Peter Wilson. According to Wilson:

The British press were just disgraceful . . . Ali's room was meant to be a sterile environment – his body was just an open sore – but you had all these publicity-seeking English journalists leaning over him, putting his head next to their heads, dropping their hairs on to his

body. Eventually he was saying in Arabic, 'Keep them away from me, keep them away.' [<http://media.guardian.co.uk/iraqandthemediastory/0,,12823,1010181.00.html>]

The mythic narrative is that Ali Abbas was injured in a US missile attack in which most of his family were killed, and that he nearly died but was rescued by the intervention of the world (specifically the US and UK) after journalists publicized his case. Evacuated to Kuwait by the US military and then flown to Britain for further treatment, he was given 'Indefinite leave to remain' in 2004. The *Daily Mail* ran a report on Ali Abbas on 7 April 2004. The text illustrates well the narrative of invasion – rescue – liberation:

It is barely a year since he was first introduced to the world, swathed in bandages in a Baghdad hospital. If the war in Iraq had one face, it was that of Ali, who had lost his arms and almost his entire family – including his parents and younger brother – in an American missile strike on his home. Doctors said it would have been better if he had died. Could this really be the same little boy who is now studying for his GCSEs here in Britain, in a leafy corner of south-west London? . . . Indeed, Ali's life has changed in a way that few would have thought possible. British surgeons have given Ali new arms, of course. And members of the public have rallied round, donating tens of thousands of pounds to help secure his future, and those of other children like him. During the past momentous year Ali has even been introduced to Tony Blair. (Bracchi, 2004: 31)

In this mythic narrative, Ali's trajectory from the war to his new life in the UK, a life made possible by the benevolence of the British people and government, stands in for the life of Iraq as a nation. The image of him before treatment symbolizes the tragedy of the war, his near death parallels the collapse of Iraq following the invasion, while his rescue and recovery can be read within the narrative of liberation which the US and UK governments unwaveringly constructed from naming the invasion 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', Blair's speech insisting that 'we will liberate you. The day of your freedom draws near' (Bush and Blair, 2003) to Bush's victory speech and into the post-invasion settlement. The pro-war tabloid, the *Sun*, 'drew a clear analogy with the state of Iraq itself, disabled for its own good, to be built up again with high-tech prosthetics and kindly western help' (Holland, 2004: 192).

'REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS': THE RHETORICAL USE OF IMAGES

Sontag shares with other writers talking about images of what Taylor (1995) calls 'body horror' the view that the further away a person is geographically from the viewer, the more extreme the images of suffering, death and

violence will be. Discussing the 'missing body', Taylor tempers his analysis of the general acceptability to picture editors of extreme images of the suffering of distant people when the causes of their suffering are military actions of the intended audience's country. In these instances, he argues that 'the body goes missing' and is replaced by accounts of damage to hardware, infrastructure and the use of domesticated metaphors (like traffic jams or football matches) to describe death and injury to the other side.

However, the range of images in *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mirror* and the Arab press of children during the Iraqi war cannot be explained within either Sontag's paradigm that the viewer can be expected to look, if not with equanimity, then with a morbid voyeurism on images of distant suffering – nor within Taylor's view that audiences will inevitably be shielded, at least at the time, from the consequences of their government's military actions.

The contrast in images used in the *Daily Mirror* and those used in *The Guardian* suggests that the selection of images is more contextual or directed to a specific purpose than either of these arguments allows. The images in *The Guardian* made it possible to view the impact of the war on children within a narrative of liberation in which children, already lacking social and familial support, were to be rescued from their isolation and taken care of. In this narrative, following the invasion, Iraqi children could look forward to the future with confidence. While this elision of the death and injury caused by the war to Iraqi children may seem to fit with Taylor's general schema about war reporting, it can more easily be explained by the theme running through the paper's editorial policy that, while sceptical about official claims of the war's purpose and dubious about the legality of the invasion, there was nonetheless a strong possibility that if the war led to Saddam Hussein's capture then the Iraqi people would be liberated from oppressive rule.

Despite all the cynical and self-conscious coverage, the post-Cold War consensus that the West has a moral duty to intervene for humanitarian reasons still holds. Hence many of the critics of the build-up to war simultaneously advocated far-reaching Western interference in Iraq. (Hammond, 2003: 34)

The *Daily Mirror*, who claimed that the most likely outcome of the war was that it would be 'the fuse which sets the anger of the Arab world alight' (Reade, 2003), used images of the war that framed its impact on children as being violent, deadly and frightening. In these images, the presence of a caring adult contrasts with the absence of such figures in *The Guardian* images. The purpose of the *Daily Mirror*'s images was to emphasize the illegality of the war and the lies of the British government about the motivations for war. More than this, its narrative was one of shame about what was being done 'in our name'. This narrative is extremely rare in reporting during war. Generally, as Taylor (1995) and Sontag (2003) make clear, papers are not in the business of shaming their readers or asking them to reflect on uncomfortable questions about the connections between their

own and their government's culpability. While the *Daily Mirror* did not exclusively use images of children in its war reporting, it is worth commenting on their use of such images. The child is taken in these images to be the epitome of innocence, as the paper makes clear in its caption 'INNOCENT' to the picture, discussed earlier, of a young child badly burned in an attack. The figure of the child, existing outside political calculation, becomes the most potent argument against any possible justification of the war.

The *Daily Mirror's* consistently anti-war stance in the 2003 Gulf War is markedly different to its pro-war stance in the 1991 conflict. However, in both instances its style of reporting the war in clear and simple terms was maintained. The differences between the narratives of liberation framed by *The Guardian's* images of children and the reinforcement of the war as an illegal and violent attack on Iraqi civilians in the *Daily Mirror's* pictures of children can also be explained by *The Guardian's* adherence to a broadsheet style of providing a rounded and complex view of news in which readers are invited to come to their own conclusions (Taylor, 1995: 129).

In these representations, the *Daily Mirror* shares with the Arab press, indeed using some of the same images, an insistence on confronting its readers with the brutal realities of the invasion. There is, of course, a critical difference between the two sources – a difference that again contests Sontag's (2003) argument. The Arab press's unflinching depiction of the death of children and the grief of their parents in the Iraqi war goes against the grain of Sontag's argument, among others, that proximity and distance correlate to whether images of suffering will be veiled or explicit. It would seem that the intentions of picture editors and their calculations of readers' interests, sensibilities and the role of news in shaping opinion are more decisive factors in the selection of images than whether the subjects depicted are imaginatively or geographically distant from or close to the viewer.

NOTE

1. Regulation of the press in the UK is mostly achieved through self-censorship. In wartime, legal constraints on the press can be extended but in practice the DA(Defence Advisory)-Notice System has been observed. The DA-Notice System advises editors about defence and counter-terrorist information, the publication of which might be damaging to national security. The system is voluntary, it has no legal authority, and the final responsibility for deciding whether or not to publish rests solely with the editor or publisher concerned.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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