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The Ambiguity of Amateur Photography in Modern Warfare

Frances Guerin

ARE AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHS of war and battlefields possible today? Or do amateur photographers and their portrayals of war belong to a bygone era? Have the provocations of amateur images that resist official versions of war been lost to the proliferation of digital possibilities, the overwhelming impact of consumer culture, and the domination of the mass media? Has the disquieting potential of the amateur vanished amid the glut of images of war and violence? If the answer to all these questions is no, then how can we identify amateur photographs of war? And how do we talk about them in today's cultural climate?

I ask these questions because *prima facie* the images of war and violence that flood our screens today do not distinguish between amateur and professional. The photographs are taken by whomever arrives first at the scene of the crime and happens to post on social media. If they are judged to tell a truth about events, the images are edited, reposted, appropriated, and reproduced ad infinitum across the Internet. Thanks to the availability of technology and its dissemination, photographs once recognized as amateur are reused as official witnesses to the latest tragedy. More or less as Walter Benjamin predicted, everyone has become an expert when it comes to taking photographs of war and violence.¹ In addition, news channels and the printed press routinely use the photographs of individual citizens, perpetrators, and bystanders on account of their apparent authenticity. While the supposed truth is inevitably manipulated when amateur images are culled and reedited to provide evidence within official reportage—and thus, they forego their status as amateur—they are nevertheless passed off as representations of what really happened. Their truth value relies on a claim to eye-witness immediacy and spontaneous, “uncensored” access to events.² And so we cannot see the difference between amateur and professional war reportage. It is no longer possible to locate the amateur in the materiality and aesthetic. Moreover, the vernacular visions of individual citizens have become so convincing that professional journalists routinely appropriate

the amateur's means of photographic production and reproduction in order to convey a first-hand, truthful image of war. If amateur photographs were once identifiably distinct from professional photographs, the difference has now become muddied.

As a result, I want to suggest that traditional definitions of amateur photographs of war are no longer useful. There was a time when the amateur image of war was identified as a site of truth and authenticity because it emerged in the blindspots of ideological and political structures. Today, however, these structures are so tightly controlled that they oversee all image production. Amateurs and their photographs of war and violence as we knew them from the twentieth century have become subservient to technological developments and the political and cultural labyrinths of twenty-first-century power. This does not mean amateur images of war are no longer produced, rather that they are more difficult to find.

In this article I consider two widely known examples of amateur photographs as a way to reconceive amateur photography of war and violence. The first example, the photographs taken by German soldiers in World War II, presents images that fit comfortably within existing definitions of the amateur. Indeed, even though these photographs were discovered fifty years after being taken, they were produced by and in a cultural and historical context that enabled their definition as amateur. Specifically, amateur photographs taken by soldiers on the World War II battlefield belong to the height of industrial modernity. Simultaneously, their status as amateur enables their revelations.

Secondly, I discuss the much-reproduced, debated, critiqued, and reviled photographs taken by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. These photographs were digitally produced in conditions that enabled their (unanticipated) dissemination and proliferation. They were also disseminated into a visual landscape designed to obfuscate the very events portrayed. Unlike the photographs taken by German soldiers in the early 1940s, those taken at Abu Ghraib emerged in a context that was rigidly controlled in an effort to guarantee the invisibility and, by extension, the absence of images that might contest the official version of events. While different from 1940s Europe, the specific cultural and historical context, as I will show, enabled the emergence of amateur photographs in the Abu Ghraib prison. In turn, what was rarely acknowledged at the time was that, once again, it was their status as amateur that enabled the heated debate that followed. Thus, despite significant differences, the two sets of images share certain key attributes and effects. In turn, these characteristics enable both sets of images to generate debate. Consequently, the same characteristics offer a new

approach to understanding amateur photography of war today. Specifically, the debates generated by similar images today are more reliable indicators of their amateur identity than are their aesthetic and material characteristics.

To be clear, I am not making a claim about the specific content of the photographs taken by World War II German soldiers or those of American soldiers in Abu Ghraib. In both cases, there is an abundance of literature that interprets, exposes, and considers their implications. Rather, my concern is to juxtapose these images to illuminate their significance for a renewed understanding of the amateur photograph of war.

My reconception of the amateur is motivated by a need to embrace the shifting function of amateur images in particular, and media images more generally, in today's rapidly changing visual landscape of war and violence. Specifically, my reconception shifts away from traditional analyses that focus on what the images look like, what is captured in their aesthetic, the identity of the photographer, or whether he or she was paid for his or her work. Instead, I focus on how the image is used, the effects it enjoys, and the persistent ambiguity of its multiple meanings. Most importantly, all of these attributes make sense within the culturally and politically determined imagescapes that produce the photographs. By focusing on the life of images, their potential to disrupt official visions of war and the battlefield, my goal is to find a more adequate approach to determining the agency and effect of amateur photographs of war and violence today. In turn, this identification and understanding extends the meanings generated by the photograph, and places the responsibility for its continued agency to reveal, resist, and provoke with us, its viewers. Ultimately, I argue that amateur photographs still have the capacity to resist the ideological and political control exercised over image production and dissemination.³ To recognize this we need a new definition. Before that, however, we must understand how amateur images as we know them historically were produced and how they operated within broader cultural and ideological contexts.⁴

Amateur Photographs Traditionally Conceived

Amateur photographs of the battlefield were typically produced by soldiers, bystanders, witnesses, collaborators, and resisters of modern warfare. These images were taken and processed from the battlefields of Crimea to those of World War II. I have argued elsewhere that the impact of amateur photographs of modern warfare derived from their tendency to depict the forbidden and the outlawed. Amateur photo-

graphs characteristically showed what the powers-that-be would have preferred to remain invisible, that is, what was not seen in official images. As such, amateur images possessed a capacity to reveal the vulnerability of official uses of photography as they bolstered ideology.⁵ Most often amateur photographs achieved this goal irrespective of their diverse intentions. Moreover, the power of amateur photography lay in the fact that it typically did not consciously set out to expose the invisible: nor was it in the habit of direct provocation. Amateur photography up to World War II often focused on unanticipated, otherwise-thought-to-be inconsequential details that belonged to a context deemed irrelevant to the waging of war. Such a context might be, for example, the leisure time of soldiers, the building of munitions, or daily life on the home front. As we know, the details in amateur images taken in Germany during World War II in particular have produced a wealth of information about the plans, processes, and execution of warfare. And, in the course of their daily lives, amateur photographers sometimes happened to see extraordinary events that might otherwise have remained invisible. If amateur photography of warfare no longer has this power of exposure, the power to make visible the invisible, it is because the image has become obsequious to the political and ideological mainstream manipulation of images. In turn, the most urgent question becomes: where can we find images of the invisible today? The question is urgent because, as Jacques Rancière would have it, making visible and sayable what is otherwise invisible and silent is a powerful way to resist—in this case—the official, ideologically manipulative vision of war.⁶

Rancière's argument for "making sensible," that is to say, available to the senses, what is otherwise not available to social discourse, is politically and socially motivated. Rancière's concern is to create the possibility of public discourse for and about that which otherwise has no social identity or no reality within space and time.⁷ Moreover, according to Rancière, this is made possible through art, by means of an aesthetic that is both "revealing" and "experimental." It must be both, because art's function is to disturb the given (visible) fields of possibility. Rancière doesn't say as much, but the assumption is that organizational systems and social divisions can comfortably accommodate art that maintains exclusions, invisibility, unsayability, and inaudibility. That is, without disturbance, the practice of art is not political. Most important for Rancière is that the aesthetic and political fields are reorganized, or reconfigured, as a result of the invisible made visible, the inaudible made audible, and the nonsubject given subjectivity. According to Rancière, it is only art that has the capacity to effect this change.

The politics of works of art plays itself out to a larger extent . . . in the reconfiguration of worlds of experience based on which police consensus or political dissensus are defined. It plays itself out in the way in which modes of narration or new forms of visibility established by artistic practices enter into politics' own field of aesthetic possibilities. . . . It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around.⁸

As I show through my two examples, amateur photographs of wars past had the capacity to generate public discourse through making visible, just as Rancière would want them to. Of key importance to this discourse is the availability of different, conflicting, and contradictory opinions. It is not enough for so-called art to make a persuasive counterargument, as this inevitably leads to a reestablished hierarchy. Making visible in Rancière's discourse must result in animated debate and a continued lack of consensus regarding people who have been deprived of identity, subjectivity, and visibility. In a postindustrial moment, political art must enable the excluded (by which Rancière means industrial workers and the economically disenfranchised) to speak for themselves and to have their voices heard as individuals. In short, making visible happens as a result of debate.

However, the way that photography achieves this—and herein lies my location of amateurism in the two examples—is not through what Rancière calls experimentation. Rather, the amateur photograph possesses an ambiguity or fluidity that ensures its continued revelation of the invisible at the margins of visibility as long as amateur images circulate within a community that, if not entirely familiar to the photographer, is connected by degrees of separation. That is, amateur images may fall into obscurity, resurface, be reused or not. However, within this proximate community they maintain an invisibility that can make visible what institutions prefer to remain invisible. They have this agency because each reiteration brings with it a new context, a new audience, and, therefore, new meanings. The ineffability of meaning in amateur images simultaneously allows for multiple, contradictory, and irresolvable interpretations. And yet, when amateur images are reedited, redeployed, redisseminated to accord with the institutional structures that create exclusion and invisibility, they are no longer amateur. To fix meaning through definitive manipulation is to place the amateur image in the service of invisibility. It goes without saying that not all amateur photographs have this capacity to expose, to make visible the subjects of exclusion, stigmatization, and victimization. Just as for Rancière, not all images can play this social and political role.

Before looking at this critical tension between visibility and invisibility, between the sayable and the unsayable, as it is manifest in the amateur photographs of World War II and Abu Ghraib, I want to reflect on the ideas of another theorist of photography, Ariella Azoulay. In her groundbreaking work, Azoulay argues that our task as critics of photography is to turn away from a focus on how images make meaning within the frame. Instead, Azoulay argues that we are responsible for accessing the meaning of the photograph as it functions within a contextual circuit. The spectator is charged with completing “the civil contract” between the photographer, the photographed, and the spectator. To explain this by way of example, Azoulay discusses press photographs of crimes committed against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. She shows how photographs of children, women, Palestinian taxi drivers, and others—people who are stateless, without identity, voice, or citizenship in the West Bank—give a voice to these same people. When press photographs of them are passed around (which includes being passed on to us as spectators of the image, for example, in a Reuters report), a community is established. The community coheres around the photograph, and comprises the press photographer, the people photographed, and viewers. In turn, the stateless are given a form of “civil citizenry.” Azoulay calls this “the civil contract of photography.”⁹ The Palestinian victims are not just made visible, but are given an identity and a subjectivity within the community established by photography. Azoulay argues that “photography, being in principle accessible to all, bestows universal citizenship on a new citizenry whose citizens produce, distribute, and look at images.”¹⁰ Communities of citizens are also created by amateur photography. However, only one aspect of Azoulay’s discussion interests me here: our role in the created community. Accordingly, this is defined by our responsibility as spectators to look at what is otherwise invisible and to identify the citizens of photography. If we follow the logic of Azoulay’s argument, together with the political image as it is conceived by Rancière, then when we look at amateur images of war, we discover multiple different spectators, multiple meanings, and, in turn, the rise of a public debate that disorders.

If we can agree that we now live in a historical moment when the private and personal have been erased by the transformed dimensions of war and modernity; if we agree that war is on our doorsteps and embroiled in our daily lives, then we have to acknowledge that these erasures have taken with them the force of amateur photography as we once knew it.¹¹ Given this situation, we must focus on how to see and understand alternative, noncommercial, and so-called private images, what we do with them, and what we need to know in order to harness their power.

It is imperative that we find and recognize the moments of invisibility made visible by amateur images of war if we are to take responsibility. Photographs that do what amateur images of war once did are still being produced by citizens every day. To recognize them, we must first see “amateur” through this new lens as I lay it out: we must consider how images are used, the effect they enjoy, the debates they generate, and the communities that form around them. Even though these amateur images may be visually indistinguishable from those used in the press and other public, government-sanctioned institutions, with a renewed approach, as spectators, we will be able to expose the invisible traces of war. The question is no longer what is and is not an amateur image, but rather, how we as creators and viewers of photographs of war see and understand the narratives and communities that form around them.

Amateur Photography, War, and the Modern Battlefield

German soldiers’ photographs in World War II accord with traditional definitions of the amateur. The amateur was born of industrial modernity.¹² In their earliest identities, amateur scientists, aesthetes, philosophers, and photographers belonged to polite, bourgeois society. Similarly, from the beginning, amateurs typically practiced their art productively and creatively, within a community, and never for financial or professional gains.¹³ The amateur was a bourgeois individual who pursued a pastime with fervor and passion, taking his or her interest seriously and, in the case of photography, belonging to a club of like-minded people practicing their passion. By the late nineteenth century, these clubs produced newsletters or journals in which tips and instructions on how to improve were given to members. The clubs held equipment for taking and developing photographs, and provided opportunity for self-betterment through engagement in activities and excursions for members.

Simultaneously, in the mid-nineteenth century when industrialization was growing rapidly and photography was invented, time was measured by the length of the day at the factory. This created the opportunity and desire for leisure and entertainment: another defining characteristic of industrial modernity with deep connections to the rise of the amateur. Leisure time was occupied with meaningful pursuits that were nevertheless unrelated to work. In keeping with the pursuit of an amateur activity outside of the frame of the rationalization of daily life, the amateur also worked outside of institutionalized taste and aesthetics, and was free of the demands of culture.¹⁴ Amateurs pursued their pastime as a leisure activity, but they did so with serious commitment. The manner

in which the activity was carried out and the frame of collectivity went together with the identification of an “impoverished aesthetic” as the means of distinguishing amateur photography that so many critics have held onto ever since.¹⁵

This culture of amateur photography was expanding at the very same moment that the modern battlefield, with its repeating rifles, mechanized tanks, and instruments of navigation, was being defined.¹⁶ Roger Fenton took his camera to record events on the Crimean battlefield in 1854. He was among the first to do so, and he was an amateur. Though encouraged by the prince consort, he was not commissioned, he was not paid, and his images were not made for exhibition, to persuade, or to manipulate a nation. From these beginnings within industrial modernity, war and photography were united through the pursuits of amateurs. It is true that photography was not dependent on the battlefield and was practiced equally on the home front. However, war and photography influenced each other’s development thanks to their marriage with the advance of late-nineteenth-century modernity.

Photography and the modern battlefield continued to expand together with other technologies: cameras, repeating rifles, lenses, viewfinders, machine engineering, and flying machines. Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman identifies the most extreme articulation of industrial modernity—World War II and the Holocaust—as consolidating their marriage.¹⁷ Photography was used by every facet of the Nazi machinery to document, strategize, publicize, and coerce. Even before World War II, the use of official and propaganda photography in wartime was evident: to make an ideological argument, to convince the nation, to create national identity, to enlist and motivate potential soldiers, to keep the truth about war hidden from view.¹⁸ As others have argued about different historical and theoretical contexts, the official images of industrial warfare have always been most successful when they have made the violence of war invisible.¹⁹ To reiterate, invisibility is the common goal of official war photography. Official images claim visibility but manifest invisibility. Those produced by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda do exactly this: crowds in purpose-built stadiums, the Führer accepting a bouquet from a blond-haired child, the lithe machinelike bodies of soldiers in uniform, raising flags in displays of unswerving devotion to the nation and its war effort. Most significantly, the absence of death, destruction, violence, and aggression from the image was necessary to the successful sale of Hitler’s war to the nation.²⁰ The dos and don’ts of photography in Nazi Germany were known to all. Censorship laws were put in place.²¹

The goal of amateur photography in World War II has always been less clear. When looking at the hundreds of thousands of photographs

taken by German and Allied World War II soldiers, there are always questions. Who took the photograph? What is this photograph depicting? Where was it taken? What was the photographer's intention? Where was it processed? How did it find its way to the place where I am seeing it? And the questions continue. The information recorded by the amateur photograph is often no less elusive thanks to its characteristic distance: the distance of the photographer from the events depicted, the distance created by the time that has lapsed between when the photograph was taken and when it is made public, and again, between its publication and the moment I look at it. There are further distances created by the multiple (and potentially conflicting) narratives of interpretation that are made possible thanks to these first three levels of distance.²² Amateur photographs taken by World War II soldiers, for example, were not made for publication; they were not taken for distribution outside of the soldier's immediate circles, and they were typically stored in attics at the end of the war. Their visions were subjective, their meanings remained private, and as objects they remained absent for a generation. Thus, kept within this limited circle, the photographs were invisible to those outside the circle. Of course, they were also passed around, given away, reprinted as postcards, written on, and pasted in other soldiers' albums. However, the new context changed the significance of such amateur images, sometimes erasing the meaning of their previous reproductions.

Many of the questions raised by amateur photographs taken during World War II are due to their proliferation—in turn, a result of their production within modernity. The abundance of amateur photographs results from the development of lightweight, portable cameras and the German government's belief that the soldiers' photographs would advance the war effort. German soldiers, for example, were given cameras as part of their equipment and were also issued instructions on how and what to photograph. They were given incentives in the form of competitions, with winning entries being published in one of the official arms of the Nazi press. The Ministry of Propaganda recognized in the unsuspecting photograph proof of the great German nation, the pure German subject, the superiority of the German army. The photographs were, of course, edited where necessary prior to publication. When they were publicly held up as examples of Nazi ideology, the photographs ceased to function as amateur photographs.²³ It must also be remembered that when published in the weekly Nazi journals, they no longer made visible the invisibility created through ideological manipulation. Rather, their persuasive message took over the photographs in this new context.

Yet the German administration did not anticipate that as amateurs, the soldiers would take photographs in their leisure time, in addition to

those that were requisitioned as part of their service. The soldiers and officers armed with cameras took photographs wherever they went: they were often uncensored, made anonymously, bought and sold, passed around, swapped, sent home to sweethearts and families as proof of the soldier's health and well-being. Such uses of the amateur photograph also differentiated it from the official.

However, unbeknownst to soldiers at the time, their photographs also made visible what was otherwise invisible to themselves and those at home. The soldier-photographers' single most important goal was to create photographic records of the visual reality before them. They saw different things. Like tourists, the soldiers photographed "exotic" peoples in strange lands, violent deeds, and unusual events—such as hangings, mass murders, and open burials. They also photographed the locals: dirty, in threadbare clothes, suffering. Amateur photographs saw what was not in the interests of the advancement of the German war effort. True to the ambiguity and fluidity of amateur photographs, these images could easily be appropriated, designed to show the less-than-humanness of the "enemy" as vermin. Moreover, the soldiers did not anticipate that their photographs would be seen differently, and their crimes made visible, by their children and by a generation ready to discuss the complexity of Germany's involvement in the war fifty years later. This ability to be read in different ways creates an instability of meaning in amateur photographs that underlies their tendency to make visible what is invisible, as well as to maintain the obscurity of their own agenda.

The absences in the photographs allowed them to be passed over by censors: their significance was either ignored or minimized if and when they were seen by Nazi officials. At times the photographs were censored; however, the only difference between censored and uncensored was an official stamp on the back. There were no great consequences for censored images because the authorities didn't understand their potential to disrupt the propagated ideology.²⁴ It was believed the amateur images would not be seen by anyone who mattered, that is, by the Allied governments and their people. Soldiers' amateur images thus operated outside of or at the edge of constraints. This enabled them to witness what they were not supposed to: death, destruction, horrendous crimes that could not be and were not otherwise imagined. They saw things that were meant to be invisible: the home army committing public humiliations, lynchings, shootings on the side of the road and in the center of towns. All of this changed when they were discovered by the soldiers' families and brought to public attention with their exhibition in 1995 at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. As a result of the exhibition, the photographs stirred a controversy that continued for a

decade.²⁵ The same photographs were seen, fifty years after the fact, as evidence of an army bringing shame on the German nation. That is, fifty years later the amateur photograph exposed the vulnerability of official uses of warfare and photography in World War II. These amateur images exposed the cracks not fully visible within the Nazi ideology when they showed what had never been captured by official photography. However, this only happened when the soldier's next of kin in the next generation made them visible. By extension, these amateur images always had the potential to create havoc with, rather than conviction in, or support of, ideological arguments for the efficiency, organization, and imperative of modern warfare.

Seventy years later, we look back at these photographs and see the amateur image at its most effective, its most resistant, its most conceptually discrete. It was distinct from the images produced by professional and official photography units sent by the German and Allied governments to record events at the Front. However, we must remember that this claim is only possible in retrospect, because the photographs taken at the Front remained invisible to the public eye for a generation. It was not until the soldiers began to die and their relatives found the photographs in attics and cellars across Germany that we learned of their existence. Between their creation during World War II and their discovery in the 1990s, the amateur images were understood as mementos and private keepsakes of the soldiers' time on the battlefield. It was the next generation that took on the responsibility to make visible what was otherwise kept invisible about World War II. They used the photographs to question the citizenship of the soldiers and to grant it to those who had been without subjectivity in the 1940s: those persecuted by the Nazis. Furthermore, I would argue that what gave these amateur photographs the capacity to challenge the not-yet-laid-to-rest narratives of German history was their ambiguity. Their most impressive provocation was not simply that they made visible what had always been kept invisible. Rather, it was that they ignited a public controversy. Aging soldiers, their adult children, museum curators, the German public, international audiences, Jewish survivors, and Polish bystanders all had different opinions regarding the meanings of the photographs. It was the vociferous debates spawned by these amateur photographs that effectively gave them the power to make audible what had never previously been heard.

From the outset, the amateur photographs look different aesthetically. They were usually made with less expensive equipment, and, most significantly, they were not manipulated in processing or edited in postproduction. Thus, these vernacular photographs taken at the Front are identifiable as amateur in a traditional sense. Unlike the

official photographs, they are also marked by mistakes and flaws, over- and underexposure, and objects and people in the distant background or at least off-center. When the images were discovered in the 1990s, these apparent imperfections guaranteed the photographs were telling the truth. For the World War II soldiers, no guarantee was needed: the photograph was handed around to friends, across communities, to family on the home front, for all to see. They were used to create a community of citizens, people with an identity created by the photograph.

Nevertheless, there is still more to be seen in these amateur photographs today, seventy years later. As we now know, they exposed the lies of the official images of the war. In spite and because of their multiple interpretations, they cracked the hermetic seal of Nazi ideology. And simultaneously, if unawares, they told the truth of what the soldiers were doing on the battlefield. The photographs made visible the soldiers' own crimes. And because of the integral distance of amateur photographs, these crimes were contested. Disagreement, public outrage, and a wealth of discursive representation reveal World War II soldiers' amateur photographs as a site at which the efficiency and instrumentality of modernity began to erode in the 1990s.²⁶

Amateur Photographs of War Redacted

If the soldiers' snaps of World War II are illustrative of the critical but conveniently invisible relationship between amateur photography and resistance to war in modernity, the role of images on and off the battlefield changed with the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, what was meant to stay invisible was revealed for all to see. The only difference was that it was done by government-deployed photographers and news cameramen. Photographers paid by the state and the official media took images of the horrific violence of American soldiers toward other soldiers, Vietnamese civilians, and their homes. Never before had such sights been disseminated so widely and been met with such horror at the home front. The images made and sold for mass consumption made visible what was supposed to remain invisible. And their immediate visibility was largely thanks to the government's misunderstanding of advances in image technology: namely, the role that still and moving images could play in the public imaginary. The burning of My Lai, women and children lying in cinders on the side of the road; Nick Ut's photograph of the naked child screaming helplessly, running away from a napalm strike; and Eddie Adams's photograph of the South Vietnamese police chief killing the Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Van Lem in Saigon in 1968

became the icons by which we define the Vietnam War. They exposed lies and made visible what those whose interest it was to perpetuate the war intended to keep invisible. Moreover, they were all professionally produced photographs.

When the US went to war to fight the next invisible enemy in Iraq, the Bush administration ensured the same mistakes were not repeated.²⁷ The waging of war and the role of photography became more tightly entwined than ever.²⁸ In Iraq, still and moving photographic images were used to justify the waging of the Persian Gulf War. Images were used strategically to keep citizens at home in the US blind to the truth of what was taking place on the battlefield in Iraq. Citizens were designated audiences to a performance. As Barbie Zelizer, among others, so eloquently argues, from 1990 war was transformed into an image.²⁹ From the war's outbreak, all we knew of it were the photographs that appeared in the media. Other writers have pointed out that the sanctioning of images from the battlefield has led to a situation in which the enemy is only known through the images he creates. Boris Groys, for example, claims without reserve in his discussion of Osama bin Laden's use of video that as a result of the expanded role of images in war, the terrorist no longer waits for his acts to be represented, but that "the act of war itself coincides here with its documentation, with its representation. The function of art as a medium of representation and the role of the artist as a mediator between reality and memory are here completely eliminated."³⁰ The controlled image-deployment exercised by the first Bush administration in carrying out Operation Desert Storm eventually led to the so-called perpetrator taking over the role of the amateur in Operation Iraqi Freedom. By 2004, at the height of the ongoing "War on Terror," the terrorist perpetrator occupied the only space apparently left uncolonized by the media.³¹ He documented his own body in hiding.

The official images of Operation Desert Storm were carefully censored, sanctioned, and sanitized: the view of cameras on smart bombs with not a human being in sight were fed back home to the nightly news. Documentaries were made for prime time television of the tanks and technologies that had been designed with precision to ensure American success in the Gulf. Heavily censored news broadcasts from reporters in Baghdad provided all the information that audiences needed to know. The US led the way to a new era of clean, surgically precise warfare. The directives on taking photographs were clear: the war was to be kept invisible, the truth conveniently withheld. We all knew there had to be blood somewhere in Iraq, but the only narrative made visible was that of the heavily censored images that came back from the battlefield. If there were signs of destruction, they were reminiscent of World War I

photographs of explosions on a horizon, or aerial shots of indistinct pockmarked landscapes. Alternatively, the pyrotechnics of flashing lights seen through the filter of night vision glasses were thrilling rather than devastating.³²

And then, in 2003, as young George W. Bush was finishing off the task begun by his father in Iraq, Sergeant Joe Darby handed a series of photographs taken by a “few bad apples” at Abu Ghraib prison to Army Criminal Investigation Command. The photographs of soldiers as spectators and performers in violent abuses against Iraqi prisoners were published by CBS News in April 2004. The Iraq War changed course, domestic confidence waned, and the world was repulsed. The Abu Ghraib photographs of piles of naked prisoners, a man on a dog leash, and a prisoner hooded with his hands and genitals connected to electrodes began to trickle out and then quickly streamed onto the Internet via *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*.³³

Early interpretations of the Abu Ghraib images stressed their revelation of a peculiarly American immorality, their betrayal of the American malaise that fueled invasion and occupation in Iraq. Susan Sontag, for example, famously claimed that the perpetrator photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib prison were rare because the torturer was included in the photograph. Only a contemporary American soldier could turn cold-blooded violence into a spectacle of which he or she was proud. Nevertheless, the trophy photographs taken on the battlefields of World War II repeatedly showed soldiers and their victims together in the same image. Often the soldiers from Germany of another era struck identical poses beside their victims.³⁴ There were many other resonances between those taken by German soldiers in the early 1940s and the Abu Ghraib photographs. For example, both sets of images were never meant to be released to the world. They were private images of daily events made for a community of soldiers and their friends and families at home. There were of course differences, but these differences were not in kind. For example, the temporal distance between when the Abu Ghraib photographs were taken and their exposure to the world was considerably less than the time it took for the German soldiers’ images to surface. The Abu Ghraib photographs took a few months rather than decades. That the images were taken indoors, in color and close up, digitally produced and disseminated, also made the crimes depicted seem more outrageous.

In kind, however, these images are no different from those I discuss above. They are photographs taken by soldier-photographers that record daily life in the prison. In addition, the Abu Ghraib photographs were reportedly used in the exact same manner as those taken by German soldiers in World War II: as keepsakes, passed around by soldiers to

other soldiers within the unit as a document of their activities.³⁵ As was the case on the World War II Eastern Front, ordinary lives were made extraordinary by the context of war, and unimaginable events were part of the everyday. The photographs created a community of soldier-citizens. Once they were published, however, the communities that gathered around them multiplied, and thus their meanings proliferated. It happened much faster than in Germany, and there was no need to wait for a new generation to discover them; but again, these photographs told a story the world was not expecting. They revealed a reality that was nowhere in the official images of the war. True to their status as amateur images, they did not set out to make visible the invisible horrors of war, to make sayable what could never have otherwise been uttered. The soldiers could not have anticipated that their images would receive such widespread dissemination and surely would never have imagined their own exposure as perpetrators of unimaginable crimes.

Like those of their German counterparts sixty years earlier, the Abu Ghraib photographs are amateur and thus open to multiple interpretations. Although in the months following their publication, they were seen as representing one thing, the horror resulting from violent acts by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib, public outrage was not the only reaction. As time went on, their meaning and significance shifted, and they became fiercely debated. And as Dora Apel suggests, there are further interpretations still to come.³⁶ The fluidity and ambiguity of their meanings make them available for appropriation—to be seen by communities as diverse as low-level soldiers, the Bush administration, Iraqi prisoners, Iraqi protesters of American occupation, or readers of *The New Yorker*.³⁷ Each new viewer generated by these appropriations sees a different image, in a different context, further complicating the issues raised by the existence of the photographs. A heated and prolonged public discourse was generated about what was otherwise unsayable: the lies and crimes, complex and multifaceted, that were fiercely concealed in the US's denial of its own responsibility for its occupation activities in Iraq. Moreover, it was the culture of war as a performance of images that gave Abu Ghraib soldiers the right to take these photographs. The clinically sanitized wars in Iraq were stained by the revelations of amateur photographs that were meant to remain private. In addition, the Pentagon and the White House could never have anticipated the force of digital imagery. In 2003 the ready accessibility of digital images, from production to dissemination, had not yet been realized.

Once the photographs were in the public sphere, being simultaneously edited and reused for diverse public protests, arguments proliferated regarding their content. Some claimed they were staged for the camera,

others that they were faked, and still others that they were point-and-shoot documents. In interviews Lynndie England, the young woman in a number of the photographs, claimed that she was under the sway of her lover, Charles Graner, and that she posed with corpses and humiliated Iraqi prisoners because she was following Graner's wishes to receive his approval.³⁸ She denied any involvement in the activities that led to the display of violence in the photographs.³⁹ In another highly debated issue, while it was clear that these images evidenced horrific crimes, there was no consensus over who was to blame. Was the soldier in the photograph responsible, or was the real culprit the one who committed the crimes in the first place? Perhaps responsibility lay with the photographer? In addition, when the victims were interviewed, they gave testimonies that contradicted those of the soldiers.⁴⁰ And what of the Bush administration that had not only sanctioned torture, but required it? And the superiors who had turned a blind eye? Janis Karpinski was in command of the unit, but what about the Pentagon and Donald Rumsfeld, who knew of and had authorized the use of torture against prisoners? Or Bush himself, who claimed that it was an isolated incident committed by "a few bad apples?" What exactly were these photographs witness to?⁴¹

The questions raised by these photographs were infinite. The discourses that surrounded them are quite different from those generated by the German Wehrmacht photographs, primarily because the war in question was still being carried out when they came to public attention. But nevertheless, like the debate ignited by the German soldiers' photographs, a controversy raged. In spite of all the differences from amateur photographs of the past, and for all the unanswered and unanswerable questions, the result of the controversy they stirred was fundamentally the same: they made visible what the authorities would have preferred to stay invisible. They showed that violations of human rights were rampant in the Abu Ghraib prison. For all of the questions surrounding the photographs taken by World War II German soldiers, the same could be said: they showed that crimes took place.

The photographs taken by soldiers at Abu Ghraib continue to fulfill the criteria of amateur images as I have reconceived them: war and its image become one and the same thing. Even as they raise questions that cannot be answered, the amateur photographs redefined the war, its perpetrators, and its victims. And as was the case with the *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* (Crimes of the German Army) exhibition in 1995, as the exhibition and dissemination of the Abu Ghraib photographs broadened, the issues became increasingly complex.⁴² With each new community of spectators, new forms of symbolic citizenship (in Azoulay's sense) were created by these photographs. Beyond the low-level soldiers, the

images gave citizenship and identity to the prisoners and to Iraqi people victimized by American soldiers. To reiterate, it was because the reins on image production and dissemination in the decades of the Iraq wars were so tightly held that the space for their articulation as amateur was possible. The assiduity of attempts to control official images is what created the possibility of amateur photographs that could challenge and contest.⁴³ Similarly, the actions of the soldiers created public discourse and invited multiple spectators to complete the interpretation with a goal of reorganizing and reconfiguring the status quo.

Even though in 2003 we had apparently reached a historical moment when “there is no reality, just images” of war, the example of Abu Ghraib proved otherwise.⁴⁴ Even though by 2003 amateur images had no power to challenge a nation’s involvement in war, even though there was no apparent space for amateur images as they had functioned at the height of modernity, the digital photographs taken by soldiers at Abu Ghraib were able to do just this. Each reinvention of the way the images are used, each edition and consequent exhibition of these photographs, continues to be unanticipated. The proliferating amateur image continues to keep secrets even as it exposes others. These photographs are evidence, above all, that as mass culture continues to subsume all image production, the possibility of cracks and fissures still exists. Thanks to its distance and, especially, its distinction from images in the service of official ideology, the amateur cannot be pinned down.

Amateur Photographs of War Today

Over the past fifteen years, the distinctions that supported the perpetuation of war and violence within industrial modernity—homefront and battlefield, perpetrator and victim, soldier and civilian—have continued to erode. War no longer takes place in a circumscribed geographical arena. The onetime homefront has become the battlefield. In European democracies such as France and Germany, soldiers armed with Kalashnikovs patrol streets lined with sixteenth-century architecture that are home to locals and stops on the tourist map. The visible and audible markers of the battlefield have become a part of daily life: military soldiers, guns, sirens. Borders are more assiduously patrolled, but the enemy remains on the inside: it cannot be predicted, cannot be seen, cannot be traced. The enemy soldier is fully invisible. In terms of time, as well as space, the lines between war and peace have been permanently erased. The “war without end against no readily definable enemy” is being played out in full force on the streets of European cities.⁴⁵

In keeping with this situation, the images through which today's wars are known and understood have become integrated into the fabric of the everyday. The news updates run 24/7, messages flash on our screens and sing out on our telephones when someone is killed. The unending footage of atrocities alerts us to the ongoing wars. Moreover, with the shifts in modern warfare, the distinction between amateur and professional as we once knew it has become too complicated to uphold.⁴⁶ The amateur and professional now work in tandem, and their products are visually interchangeable: together they create the imagescape through which wars are known. With porous borders, the rapid growth of the Internet, and access to images, globalization, and the proliferation of technology, there is no beginning or end to images that are neither and both amateur and professional. Every image is produced within the framework of consumer culture. Even when private individuals take photographs of streets that have become a battlefield, they do so to post on social media, to show the world what they see. These platforms perform the censorship, ensuring that photographs are edited, taken down, deleted, or masked. The personal has become more political than ever. And yet, the unpredictability and fluidity of the individual's perspective, the amateur vision, has been removed. The amateur's edge has been blunted. The amateur has apparently been subsumed by technological advance and, most ironically, by the spread and proliferation of war.⁴⁷

So the question remains, if we want to continue to harness the power of amateur images of war, how and where can we locate their act of making visible what is meant to remain invisible? Where can we find the images that will generate debate where none is otherwise possible? Even if we don't call them amateur, we need to recognize images of war that resist by undermining the visions of governments and bureaucracies. We need to recognize photographs that play with, confuse, or ignite discourse through exposing the invisible, particularly when they occupy the margins of visibility. That is, particularly, when the questions they raise have no resolution.⁴⁸

Photographs of resistance and their revelation within the public sphere take time to emerge. Even those taken at Abu Ghraib did not come to public attention immediately. In addition, because the imagescape continues to mutate and simultaneously expand, the cracks within it will take more time to locate. Thus, the present cultural context is one in which amateur images of war appear continuous with the media and have lost their force. The collapse of the infrastructural forms and factors that enabled war in modernity, the forms and factors that enabled amateur images in World War II, and those that took us by surprise in 2004, have changed the visual representation of war irrevocably. Nevertheless, im-

ages filled with ambiguity and an impetus to expose and make visible, to create alternative communities, will still emerge. Accordingly, when amateur photographs do arise, a focus on their unpredictability, fluidity, and ambiguity is a place to begin identification and analysis. In turn, the ineffability that plays out in the tension between visibility and invisibility within the various communities—or citizens—created by amateur images will be key to debate and their power to reorganize. Ultimately, it is the effects they have, the lives they lead, and the debates they ignite that make amateur images critically essential to the imagescape of war and violence in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1 Walter Benjamin refers to the lack of distinction in knowledge about images between the public and so-called experts. This results from the accessibility of the mass-produced image. I extend his comment to describe the actual production of photographs. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 245.

The term “amateur” poses considerable challenges to scholars. In one of the most authoritative books on the topic, Janina Struk oscillates between designations of “private” photographs, “individual’s” photographs, “citizen journalism,” and “amateur photographs.” Others refer to “amateur photography,” vernacular photography, or citizen photography, among other terms. Struk, *Private Pictures: Soldiers’ Inside View of War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

2 The conception of “sanitization” began with the representations made by cameras attached to smart bombs in the first Gulf War. See the essays in Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz, eds., *Seeing through the Media: The Persian Gulf War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994). These essays discuss the many kinds of “sanitization” and making invisible of this war. On questions of alternative images to the media, see Martha Rosler, “A Discussion Between Martha Rosler and Maria Hlavajova: Deconstructing the Allegories,” in *Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2010), 170–73. See also Frances Guerin, “Introduction,” in *On Not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–42. I discuss the constant demand for images to tell the truth, and yet, we never trust an image not to have been manipulated or edited.

3 Here I am leaning on Ariella Azoulay’s conception of the photographic community and resultant citizenship for my argument. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

4 Other critics emphasize the importance of the contexts of amateur images for their interpretation. And for reasons that become clear, I maintain that this is never more pressing than when discussing amateur photographs of war.

5 I discuss this idea of the amateur photograph produced and circulated within modernity as making visible the vulnerability of official photography. See Guerin, “The Revelation and Resistance of Amateur Images at War: Thessaloniki in the Byron Metos Collection,” in *On The Margins of War* (Thessaloniki: Byzantine Museum of Culture, forthcoming).

- 6 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
- 7 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12–19.
- 8 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 65.
- 9 Azoulay, “Photographing the Verge of Catastrophe,” in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 345–73.
- 10 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 134.
- 11 See Jeffords, “Afterword: Bringing the Death-World Home,” in Jeffords and Rabinovitz, eds., *Seeing through the Media*, 301–6.
- 12 Others make this argument in connection to developments in the technology. See, for example, Bernhard Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), especially chapters 7 and 8 on popular and amateur photography.
- 13 On the history of amateur photography, including the activities of clubs in England, see Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2012). An early, more general history is Grace Seiberling, with Carolyn Bloore, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986). In Germany, Michael Kuball, has written *Familienkino. Geschichte des Amateurfilms in Deutschland* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1980). For a more recent account, see Laura Rascaroli, Barry Monahan, and Gwenda Young, eds., *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
- 14 Philippa Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional: Antiquarians, Historians, and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986). Although her argument is about the growing division between amateur and professional in the nineteenth century, it shows that the more intense the development of industrial modernity, the greater the divide between amateur and professional.
- 15 Charles Tepperman, “Introduction,” *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923–1960* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2015).
- 16 The canonical work on this is Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).
- 17 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989). This conception of war as the ultimate articulation of a rationalized modernity has been made in relation to the Holocaust and mass murder as the most extreme extension of modernity. See Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).
- 18 Still one of the best references on the importance of photography to the Nazi war effort is Rolf Sachsse, *Die Erziehung zum Wegsehen: Fotografie im NS-Staat* (Dresden: Philo Fine Arts, 2003).
- 19 This is a commonly acknowledged characteristic of images of war, though critics will articulate it differently. See, for example, Apel’s discussion of “framing” and the control of what is in the frame in its broadest sense. Dora Apel, “Controlling the Frame: Photojournalism, Digital Technology, and ‘Modern Warfare,’” in *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), 151–82.
- 20 Although I write specifically about Germany in World War II and late twentieth-century America below, no government sanctions photography of its dead and wounded soldiers or the violence it perpetrates on an unknown enemy.
- 21 Sachsse discusses the censorship laws and how they were internalized to create a certain Nazi “perspective” on the war and its events. See Sachsse, *Die Erziehung zum Wegsehen*.
- 22 Guerin, *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011).

23 This ease with which amateur photographs can be manipulated is another characteristic. Again, the distances and the common lack of distinction in the images left them open to editing and use for purposes other than their intention.

24 The censorship of amateur photographs in World War II is a complex issue. Typically, soldiers and officers sent their exposed film to a developer back home in Germany. However, as the war developed into the East—and the crimes escalated—film was sent to photo shops in Poland, which were not interested in censorship of German film. See Sachsse, *Die Erziehung zum Wegsehen*.

25 See the catalogue for the American exhibition that never took place. Hamburg Institute for Social Research, ed., *The German Army and Genocide: Crimes Against War Prisoners, Jews, and Other Civilians in the East, 1939–1944* (New York: The New Press, 1999). On the controversy, see Christian Hartmann et al., eds., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (2005; Munich: C.H.Beck, 2015).

26 Ironically, the same scenes of violence and destruction were printed in the Soviet press in the 1940s. They were either ignored or remained invisible to those in the West.

27 On the impact of Vietnam War on strategy in Iraq, see John Dumbrell and David Ryan, eds., *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies and Ghosts* (London: Routledge, 2007).

28 See also the section “Seeing Through History,” in Jeffords and Rabinovitz, eds., *Seeing through the Media*, 19–76.

29 Barbie Zelizer, “When War Is Reduced to a Photograph,” in Stuart Allan and Zelizer, *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (London: Routledge, 2004).

30 Boris Groys, “The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror,” in *Concerning War*, 94.

31 Even this image has been appropriated now, just six years after Groys was writing. It is common practice for police to investigate the terrorist and his cell’s activities through the pictures and information on his computer.

32 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (1991; Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995).

33 Seymour M. Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib: American Soldiers Brutalized Iraqis. How Far Up Does the Responsibility Go?” *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2004; Scott Higham and Joe Stephens, “New Details of Prison Abuse Emerge: Abu Ghraib Detainees’ Statements Describe Sexual Humiliation And Savage Beatings,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2004, A01.

34 Susan Sontag, “Regarding The Torture Of Others,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004. Sontag does indicate their similarity to the lynching photographs taken in the American South. Again, what’s interesting about these is that they did not become visible in the era that they were made. They were kept as keepsakes, etc.

35 Apel outlines the multiple intentions of the photographs, as well as the different meanings they generated for different spectators or audiences. See, “Abu Ghraib, Gender, and the Military,” in *War and the Contest of Images* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2012), 79–111.

36 Apel, *War and the Contest of Images*, 81. On the many different perspectives and scholarly interest in the photographs, see Meron Benvenisti et al., *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004).

37 On issues raised by the reuse of the photographs, see Eamonn Carrabine, “Images of Torture: Culture, Politics and Power,” *Crime, Media, Culture* 7 no. 1 (2011): 5–30.

38 Apel quotes Lynndie England and General Janis Karpinski from their interviews in Errol Morris’s film, *Standard Operating Procedure*. Apel, *War and the Contest of Images*, 102.

39 See Struk, *Private Pictures: Soldiers’ Inside View of War*, 1–18 for a discussion of the use and reuse and the consequent growing ambiguity around the Abu Ghraib images.

40 From the beginnings the victims’ testimonies were heard as they were published together with the photographs in *The Washington Post*. Higham and Stephens, “New Details.”

41 The documents released as a result of the photographs detail the very intricate web of cover-ups that took place at the highest levels of government. See Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and The War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004). Danner argues that the photographs witness a transformation in the definition of war.

42 The original exhibition was staged in Munich in 1995. See *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944: Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg: Hamburg Institute for Social Research, 2002). The first exhibition of the Abu Ghraib photographs was at the International Center of Photography in New York City, curated by Brian Wallis. Every element of the exhibition, discussion, and growing debate has been further theorized and textualized. *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2004). The material continues to proliferate.

43 Both Struk and Apel use the language of contest for what I am calling amateur war photography here. See Struk, *Private Pictures* and Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images*.
44 Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 160.

45 This is a quote from the Obama administration, which has been theorized and discussed widely by cultural critics such as Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. See Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015).

46 I am thinking here of the “war on terrorism” that was announced by François Hollande in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015. The Islamic State is no longer somewhere “over there” separated by seas and mountain ranges. Rather, it exists and penetrates from the inside. Invisibility and unpredictability are its greatest power.

47 On the complex issues of appropriation of amateur images by the contemporary press, see the essays collected in Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti, eds., *Amateur Images and Global News* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011).

48 Today, these complexities of the amateur image—its aesthetic of difference, marginalization, provocation through not fully seeing what it looks at—are most convincingly taken up by avant-garde artists. This is made possible by its aesthetic and form, which is why, for Rancière, it can be so successful. Examples opposing the documentation and proliferation of warfare through drawing attention to, or making visible, the invisible include the work of Shimon Attie, Alfredo Jaar, or Walid Raad, to name but three who see this complexity.