
Do you see what I see? Representing War and the Human in the Internet Age

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On 1 February 2005, almost two years after the United States invaded the country of Iraq in “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” an insurgent group calling themselves “the Mujahideen Brigades” claimed to have kidnapped an African-American Special Ops soldier named John Adam. Posting a ransom note on ansarnet.ws, a website once famous for carrying tough talking statements by militant groups in Iraq (and now devoted to “the best diet tips and tricks”), the kidnappers bragged at having nabbed Adam in an ambush where they also killed a number of Americans and captured the rest. “God willing,” the kidnappers’ internet posting warned, “we will behead him [Adam] if our female and male prisoners are not released from U.S. prisons within the maximum period of 72 hours from the time this statement has been released” (Reid, 2005). Attached to the note was a frightful, grainy image: an African American soldier wearing desert fatigues, seated on the ground, his arms tied behind his back. Hung behind the soldier was a black flag with familiar Arabic script. A rifle was pointing directly and menacingly at his head.

Needless to say, such threats are no joke. Thousands of Iraqis and more than 180 foreigners had been kidnapped in war-torn Iraq in 2004 alone, including Sgt. Matt Maupin, who was abducted and later executed (Myers, 2014). Everyone was on edge in Iraq in early 2005. But the kidnapping of Adam still came as a surprise to the US military, who admitted they had no information on this missing American soldier. “We’re looking into it,” was all a US military spokesman could tell the Associated Press (Reid, 2005).

The rest of the world was looking into it, too. The image of the captured soldier, with his vacant expression and oddly proportioned body, quickly spread around the internet and, by the next day, Liam Cusak, the marketing coordinator of Dragon Models, USA, a toy manufacturer, recognized Adam’s face and told the military a startling fact. John Adam was not a soldier in the armed forces. John Adam was none other than Special Ops Cody, an action figure doll created by Dragon Models for exclusive sale, at a cost of \$39, at Army and Air Force Exchange Services in the Middle East (Sanderson, 2005).

The ransom story quickly unraveled, and it took only hours more for the hoaxer to come somewhat clean. On another message board commonly used by insurgents, a person using the

pseudonym al-Iraqi⁴ wrote: “In the name of God, the Most Merciful and Most Compassionate, Soldier John Adam is a toy.” He continued:

I am a 20-year old Iraqi young man. I am unarmed, independent and do not belong to any party or group. I apologize to all the parties and everyone, for I meant nothing by that [no harm]. The picture was a scheme that I made up with a toy that I bought with \$5. Today I am announcing that this news was made up, and that the picture was of a toy that I worked on with the help of some children. I cannot provide any information about me because, as I mentioned earlier, I am unarmed, and any information about me might jeopardize my life and the lives of my family. My apologies to everyone. (Mikkelsen, 2005)

We now live in an age when the huckster and the hoax have truly gone global. From Nigerian 419 scams to 9/11 truthers, we are inundated by an almost daily deluge with false promises offering instant riches or paranoid pundits offering a fabricated moral clarity. The very idea of “truth” today has perhaps never been under such sustained assault from so many corners. This is hardly surprising. Ours is a time, after all, when reality is a genre of television programming, when rumors circulate faster than fact, and when uncomfortable news is simply and summarily dismissed as “fake.”

No doubt, the fraudster, the charlatan, the counterfeiter, and the liar have all been around for as long as people have been telling stories to one other. In 1873, Nietzsche remarked on the phenomenon: “Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself—in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity—is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them” (Nietzsche, 1993, p. 80). Who could dispute the philosopher’s account? In the history of the human species, lies and deceptions are undoubtedly more common than the truth itself. And if you don’t believe me, allow me to offer you this large wooden horse from Greece as a token of our continued friendship, regardless of this small misunderstanding.

Still, in the postmodern era of instant communication and image manipulation, the opportunities and possibilities for hoaxing have multiplied significantly, raising concerns not only about the ever-precarious state of truth itself but also about the nature of the human image in a changing world, the very theme of our conference. The more connected we have become—not just technologically connected, but also connected through trade, commerce, culture, and even concern for averting a common catastrophe such as climate change—the more reliant we are on knowing how things *really* are, whether those things are half a mile or half a world away. And because words have always contained within them the seeds for untruth—for what is language after all but a unique gymnastics

of interpreting abstract sounds and symbols—the image has, since the rise of photography, assumed even more importance. The image has seemed so much more immediate and, even foolishly, less corruptible than the word. We would be wise, however, to pay attention to the old adage that says you should only believe half of what you hear, and none of what you see.

Nevertheless, fraudsters abound, playing on our desires to believe that what we see is true. The short-lived genius of al-Iraqi's kidnapping deception (if we are to believe him), was that, along with procuring a \$39 doll for \$5, he was deftly able to use American commodity culture, the GI Joe doll, against itself. The deception also craftily mocked America's own foreign policy objectives and assumed sense of strength. Added to this feat was the fact that John Adam was African American, which only made the forgery feel more realistic. That even a young man in Iraq can elaborate on American racial politics in his ruse is itself meaningful. The spread of such visual sociology concerning race in American to the fake battlefield of Iraq is a kind of testament to the hegemony of American culture in the world—almost enough to make an American feel proud.

That al-Iraqi's deception took place during wartime is certainly no coincidence. Truth may be the first casualty of war, but today it is a casualty in the form of a visual body for everyone to see, even if international law prohibits such practices. Article Thirteen of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 states that “prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity” (ICRC, n.d.). Here, acts of public curiosity have traditionally been understood to include photography when the photographs include identifying characteristics of a prisoner of war. Even the American Secretary of Defense conferred directly on this issue with his General Counsel (Haynes II, 2002) in early 2002. The driving force behind this Geneva Convention rule was a moral obligation to preserve the dignity of the detained. Captured soldiers ought not be paraded, either in the streets or on the airwaves, by the capturing power, and controlling the image of the human was one universally accepted way of preserving the humanity of the imprisoned. Something similar was in practice for the dead, whose remains must by law also be treated with dignity and respect. According to the 1977 Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions, to commit “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment,” and not only against combatants but also against non-combatants, is to commit war crimes (ICRC, n.d.).

Thus, as International Humanitarian Law makes clear, there are universally agreed upon ethical responsibilities one should adopt when representing human life—and death—during warfare. Yet the prohibitions established by international treaties are frequently ignored, especially in the internet age, when war footage can be—and often is—uploaded to YouTube instantly. While mainstream media organizations may feel compelled to follow these rules out of a sense of professional obligation and the canons of journalistic ethics, the same organizations have also drastically reduced coverage in some of the world's hottest war zones because of the danger involved in covering these conflicts.

According to the Committee to Project Journalists, more journalists were killed in the course of

their work in 2009 than in any other year since the organization began keeping detailed records in 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). And in recent years, the danger to journalists has been especially acute in the Middle Eastern region. From 2011 to 2016, Syria was the deadliest country for a journalist to work in, with at least 114 journalists having been killed there. In 2017, Iraq was the deadliest country for journalists, with Syria again following closely behind (with 8 and 7 journalists killed respectively). Since 1992, at least 186 journalists have been killed in Iraq, more than in any other country during this time period (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2017).

Citizen journalists have often filled the breach, proving international news outlets with reporting on the ground and also producing their own stories and uploading them directly to social media. But the growth of citizen journalism has not solved the problem of truth in representation. If anything, the human image has become more contested, less assured, more vexed, and less trustworthy. During the horrific war in Syria, for example, both the regime and various rebel groups routinely accused their opponents of faking war footage to win the propaganda war, behavior that is as predictable as audiences are susceptible. Consider just a couple of examples. A horrific video of someone being beheaded by a chainsaw was widely circulated in Syria, the action attributed to forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. In fact, the video is about ten years old and was shot in Mexico (Shelton, 2012). Another video claimed to show Syrian regime soldiers beating their prisoners, but the footage was later revealed to be from Lebanon in 2008 and not Syria in 2011, but not before it had appeared on major media networks such as Reuters and the Australian Broadcasting Company. Both later issued corrections (Australian Broadcasting Company, 2011). In December 2016, an image of a little girl in a ragged brown dress running down a street littered with dead bodies was widely shared on Twitter, with the caption “Girl running to survive and All her family have been killed It’s not in Hollywood This [is] real in Syria #Save_Aleppo.” The image was in fact photoshopped from a 2014 Arabic music video (Abdallah, 2016).

Nor are the deceptions limited to various rebel groups. During an emergency 2016 UN Security Council meeting in New York, Bachar Jaafari, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, brandished a photo of a kneeling soldier helping an elderly woman climb down a ledge. “Look at what the Syrian army is doing in Aleppo,” he proudly intoned. Yet the photo was from Iraq, not Syria, and not from December 2016 but from June 2016 (Observers, 2016). The United Nations setting only recalled Colin Powell’s speech 2003, where he also presented false evidence to the international community regarding Iraq’s weapons of mass (Weisman, 2005).

Each of these examples says a good deal about the motivations of those pedaling these deceptions. It would seem that these forgers are often after more than just Nietzschean vanity and are instead searching through their deceptions and manipulations for real power on the international stage. What these examples more deeply reveal, however, is a fundamental truth about audiences. It is not that we are fooled by these forgers and fakers, these deceivers and frauds. On the contrary. It is we who *allow* ourselves to be fooled by these falsifiers. And we do so only by fooling ourselves.

The forger understands this well. The forger plays with pre-existing social or narrative

constructs—the kidnapping of soldiers, the tragedy of children orphaned by war—and fills them in with easily recognizable detail. The forger plays on our sense of outrage or shock, disarming any sense we may have of disbelief while exploiting the human desire for community. For the truth is, the forger cannot exist alone. The forger wants accomplices to build his narrative with him, to add to the verisimilitude of the deception. The forger thus provides an excess of detail in some areas and a paucity of detail in others, cleverly letting the audience fill in the gaps, as they reassure themselves that they are the ones who really know how such things work. The forger is a fawner, waiting for the moment when flattery will overpower criticism. While ours is already a world of stereotypes and thinly sourced knowledge, the forger creates a parallel world *that is even more dependent on stereotypes and thinly sourced knowledge*. The forger draws us into his circus show by fashioning himself as a postmodern oracle. Yet, the truth is that we are the ones who buy the tickets. After all, the forger is always only telling us what we already believe is true, and that’s exactly what we want to hear.

There are few better examples of this phenomenon than the story of the popular blog titled “A Gay Girl in Damascus.” The author of the blog, which has since been taken down, was purportedly a young Syrian American lesbian by the name of Amina Abdullah Arraf. According to her blog, Arraf was 35 years old in the first half of 2011, when her blog went live. She claimed to have been born in October 1975 in Virginia to a Syrian father and to an American mother who had roots in the United States that date back to 1742. She also claimed to be a dual national of the United States and Syria and fluent in both English and Arabic, having moved back to Syria in 2010, where she taught English until the Syrian uprising began in 2011.

Arraf garnered significant international attention for her posts describing the Syrian popular uprising. The *Guardian* called her “an unlikely hero of revolt in a conservative country” and described the blog as “brutally honest, poking at subjects long considered taboo in Arab culture” (Marsh, 2011). CNN conducted an online interview with her for an article on gay rights and the Arab uprisings, asking “Will gays be ‘sacrificial lambs’ in Arab Spring” (Davies, 2011). Arraf also wrote passionately about the Syrian struggle for democracy, describing her actions in February 2011 this way:

I live in Damascus, Syria. It’s a repressive police state. Most LGBT people are still deep in the closet or staying as invisible as possible. But I have set up a blog announcing my sexuality, with my name and my photo.

Am I crazy? Maybe.

But I’m also aware of the winds of freedom and change blowing from one end of the Arab world to the other. And I want that freedom wind to bring with it our liberation, not just as Arabs and as Syrians, but also as women and as lesbians.

Maybe it will happen. Maybe it won’t.

But if I want it to happen, I have to begin by doing something bold and visible. I can,

because I'm a dual national and have benefits of politically connected relatives, be more visible than many women here.

In April 2011, she authored a blogpost title "My father, the hero" that described how two men from the Assad regime's dreaded security forces had come to arrest her late one night on the charges of "conspiring against the state, urging armed uprising, [and] working with foreign elements." The agents then told her father that Amina "likes to sleep with women" and proceed to threaten her with rape. Dramatically, even melodramatically, the agents departed after receiving a dressing down by her father. The post received widespread acclaim and traveled around the internet. A month later, Amina reported that she was forced to live "underground," having gone into hiding because regime forces appeared again at her door. She was lucky to have been away at the moment, she explained. Two weeks later, she said she donned a headscarf and traveled around the country, posting on the atrocities she witnessed and musing on her life. Her fan base was swelling.

Then she disappeared. Her cousin, Rania O. Ismail, took over the blog briefly to report that Amina had been arrested while "walking in the area of the Abbasid bus station, near Fares al Khouri Street...by three men in their early twenties." The cousin explained: "The men are assumed to be members of one of the security services or the Baath Party militia. Amina's present location is unknown and it is unclear if she is in a jail or being held elsewhere in Damascus." Around the world, people mobilized for her freedom. A Facebook page—Free Amina Arraf—was immediately set up. The U.S. State Department got involved. "Officials in Damascus and Washington are working to ascertain more information about Ms. Arraf, including confirmation of her citizenship," the New York Times reported (Mackey & Stack, 2011). Her disappearance was reported by everyone from Al Jazeera ("Gay blogger 'abducted' in Syrian capital", 2011) to the Washington Post (Sly, 2011) to the Associated Press ("Gay Syrian American blogger disappears in Syria", 2011). The international watchdog group Reporters Without Borders even demanded her release. ("Woman blogger abducted in continuing crackdown on coverage of protests", 2011).

But there was no one to release, of course. Amina Arraf was a figment of the imagination of Tom MacMaster, a forty-year-old white American guy from Georgia. A failed fiction writer, MacMaster had been cultivating the persona of Amina for the better part of a decade, and as a student and traveler of the Middle East, MacMaster had just enough raw knowledge to make his case sound convincing enough.

After the hoax was detected, MacMaster came forward, posting an apology on the blog. "While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground," he explained. "I do not believe that I have harmed anyone—I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about."

But of course, MacMaster's cry of "I'm guilty but only of wanting a better world" is simply not true. For one thing, the blog became a public meeting place for Syrian activists, many of whom did live under threat, so finding and spying on activists was facilitated by the blog itself. Second, the

blog trafficked in one man's idea of what life would be like for a half-American half-Syrian lesbian. By doing so, the blog not only hid what life is like for actual members of the LGBT community but also ended up replicating simplistic stereotypes about homosexuality in the Arab world. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Kevin Young describes the blog's reliance on "Orientalist fantasy," including the long tradition in the West of male writers fantasizing [about] sexy harems and poetesses" (Young, 2017). The blog was nothing more than a long cliché about Muslims, ready to be consumed by eager public.

And in what is probably the strangest element of an already strange story was this revelation. For years prior to the "Gay Girl in Damascus" blog, MacMaster (as Amina) had been contributing to another lesbian blog called "Lez Get Real," which was run by one Paula Brooks. In fact, it was Brooks who encouraged and even helped Amina to set up the "Gay Girl in Damascus" blog. Over the years, Brooks and Amina also often flirted with each other over email. In the same month that Amina was revealed to be Tom MacMaster, Brooks was discovered to be Bill Graber, a 58-year-old veteran and construction worker from Ohio. Graber was using his wife's identity the entire time, unbeknownst to the real Paula Brooks. I guess it must be true that there is no love like the lesbian love between two white, middle-aged, American men.

Perhaps most damaging, however, was the amount of global attention that was paid to unraveling this long and bizarre hoax. These were key moments in the history of the Syrian uprising, and to have the world's attention diverted away from the horrors inflicted on Syria and placed instead on a middle-aged male's desires for fame and applause for his own politics is a betrayal to the very revolution Tom MacMaster claimed to support.

MacMaster has proven himself to be a master forger in the Nietzschean mold. His talent was not to create a unique character in the form of Amina. In fact, the character of Amina pens terrible lesbian poetry, crafts cringe-worthy prose, and writes posts that merely reiterate commonly available analyses of the Syrian situation. What really enabled MacMaster's ruse to continue for as long as it did was not the character of Amina per se but rather a specific public's desire to have its biases confirmed. There was very little surprising in the blog, but what was there was composed with a painful level of detail. When Amina's cousin narrates Amina's disappearance by saying Amina was "walking in the area of the Abbasid bus station, near Fares al Khouri Street," we are almost literally plunged into a map. When she first reports being visited by the state security forces, she writes that she heard them in the courtyard and they were asking for her by name. "So, I pulled on my clothes as fast as I could," she writes, "the ones I have had laid out for such a moment; simple cotton underwear and t-shirt (no underwire or anything like that), jeans, loose fitting pullover." Why would anyone describe one's clothes this way? To write "simple cotton underwear" and to describe that one is wearing a t-shirt with no underwire seems excessive, but it is in the excess that we begin to feel as if we know Amina personally and in the level of detail that we find MacMaster's will to truth, to verisimilitude, in his blog and in his writing.

Contrasting MacMaster is Abounaddara, an anonymous and mostly female collective of self-

taught filmmakers in Syria who produce some of the most mesmerizing portraits of their country at war, and they do so with an intimacy that is almost never seen in war reporting and with an aesthetic that repudiates the excesses of stereotypical detail. Although they began creating “emergency cinema”—their term—before the Arab uprisings burst forth in late 2010, Abounaddara—the name translates into “the man with the glasses,” which is to say the man who, through his lenses, can see clearly—has been able to maintain a steady stream of production since April 2011, when the regime of Bashar al-Assad upped their wanton killing of protestors. (Their production has unfortunately trailed off in the past year). For most of the Syrian war, Abounaddara has been able to release a new short film on Vimeo (Abounaddara, n.d.) every Friday. And as the uprising turned into a revolution and then morphed into a gruesome civil war, the film collective has managed to uniquely capture the social and human dimensions of the conflict.

Their films straddle the border between art and news. Most are between thirty seconds and five minutes in length. Offered without narration and absent most frames of reference to guide viewers, they can be disorienting to those looking only for evidence of regime or rebel atrocities, and frustrating to those voyeuristically seeking out images of human carnage. This is deliberate, and it is what pushes their work outside the realm of the ruse and away from the power of the forger.

The collective is fiercely critical of the news media’s voracious appetite for gratuitous images, and has pushed for media producers to adopt their own ethics of responsibility in representation, which they term “the right to the image.” The success of that project is elusive, but no matter: the power of their films is unwavering and the films demand us to question that invisible but often heavily patrolled border demarcating art from journalism. The films also force us to ask once again that unanswerable question of whether and how art should commit itself to changing this world. Most of their films are disorienting and open-ended, beautifully open-ended, if one can responsibly summon the word beautiful for an art that confronts and displays the worst of our natures. What tend to be the most powerful of Abounaddara’s films, in my regard at least, are the interview films, performed sometimes in shadow and sometimes not.

Consider the film “What Justice” as an example, where a man describes what proper punishment for a torturer would look like, only to repudiate his ideas at the end. Like the other interview films, here we are thrown into the middle of a conversation. We, the viewers, are disoriented, desperately attempting to make sense not only of who is speaking but also who the malefactors are in the grim story being relayed. We don’t know if the torturer belongs to the regime or a part of the opposition. In lesser artistic-documentary hands, such ambiguities would resolve into a bland universalism of war is evil and humanity sucks. In lesser newsy-documentary hands, the ambiguities would be explained by banded text and baritone voice-overs. But Abounaddara’s choice of difficulty over simplicity is profound. By disrupting viewing expectations, Abounaddara forces us to look intrusively at minor details for larger meaning. Faces matter here. We find ourselves looking to a gesture to understand more from the words being spoken. The wringing of hands is made to speak. The man scratching his arm becomes a metonymic effect for the larger human experience being

dispatched.

The interview videos almost always end abruptly. By telling a person's experience rather than a full human story, the videos are by definition fragmentary, difficult, unresolved, and disrupting, as is Syria's civil war. The interview videos in particular (and Abounaddara's videos in general) do not seek to explain the politics of Syria to viewers or to argue for a tidy political solution to the butchery they are constantly menaced by. But it is precisely this open-endedness, a style which resists the easy pundit prophecy that too much of art and politics succumb to, that makes the work bracing, relevant, honest, and incomplete. And here, I should be clear, I mean incomplete in a positive rather than a negative way. "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives," the German Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno writes in this essay "Commitment," "but to resist by its forms alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads" (Adorno, 1977, p. 180).

In that same essay, Adorno criticizes the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre for their fundamental idealism. Adorno argues that Sartre's plays are in fact not so much engaged in the real world of human political choices. Rather, they become demonstrations of choosing between abstract notions of freedom or unfreedom, and in such a dialectical universe, "freedom becomes an empty claim" (Adorno, 1977, p. 180). Adorno rejects Sartre's notion of an engaged or committed art in favor of an "autonomous art," which he suggests is art which does not serve a deliberately political message though which still engages the world as an independent object.

Abounaddara's videos, it would seem to me, do just that. They refuse to "take sides" in the civil war, while taking sides against atrocity. By not fully explaining the politics of Syria to the outside world, they make epistemological demands on viewers before requesting political allegiance. Abounaddara's films thus choose an autonomous over a committed aesthetic. And as Adorno warned, "even committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions." He explains: "Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease. Under fascism too, no atrocity was perpetrated without a moral veneer" (Adorno, 1977, p. 193).

It's all too easy, of course, to allege that one's opponents are closeted fascists. What's more interesting is the idea that deception finds no alibi in good intentions. It's a thin moral veneer that degrades our own sense of civilization. Fraudsters like MacMaster don't want us to think. They want us to believe. Abounaddara on the other hand forces us not to believe and instead to think. The former produces accomplices for deception, the latter produces critics (Grafton, 1990). And if the human image is to have any meaning—and contain any truth—in our changing world, then we must learn that the less we know, the more we have to discover.

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