**THE CINE-FILES**

# Looking Outside the Image: Trusting a "Few Bad Apples" in Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008)

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> *"Pictures were taken. You have to see them."*
> -- Sabrina Harman in a letter to her wife Kelly

> *"Photographs can be responsible for incredible misperceptions."*
> – Errol Morris, in an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012

Throughout his career, documentarian Errol Morris has questioned the truth-telling nature of photographs. In his *New York Times* "Opinionator" blog, his book *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (2011), and in his documentaries, Morris argues that images don't inherently lend themselves to a clarity of understanding and vision. This recognition achieves a particular urgency and poignancy in *Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)*, Morris's 2008 documentary about the 2004 Abu Ghraib Prison controversy. Interrogating the scandalous images of dehumanization and torture, Morris's film demonstrates that images—especially when severed from their historical settings—create truths and realities that may not necessarily illuminate the events being portrayed.

The audience of *SOP* comes to the film with a perspective that has already been shaped by reductionist representations of the well-known photographs. For instance, in May 2004, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz famously lamented, "it's such a disservice to everyone else, that a few bad apples can create some large problems for everybody."[1] If prisoners were tortured, the story went, some undisciplined soldiers were to blame. Consequently, by the time *SOP* was released in theatres, both the courts and the public had already deemed guilty most of the U.S. soldiers—Wolfowitz's "bad apples"—featured in Morris's film. As Frank Möller notes, for many media outlets (and, I would add, the federal government), "the photographs were the problem, not the acts of torture."[2] In response, Morris spends the entirety of *SOP* asking his audience to question the veracity of the government's "bad apple" theory. His trademark directorial style—namely, tightly framed interviews and stylized reenactments—seeks to engender trust with his audience as his film methodically revises the tidy war narrative the media and the government quietly constructed.

In this paper, I position Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* within the larger American response to images of the Iraq War.  In addition to grounding my argument within journalistic accounts, I work with Linda Williams's observations regarding Morris's use of "the forcible frame" and Susan Sontag's work with war images. Further, Frank Möller's and J.M. Bernstein's theories on the link between images depicting pain and viewer reception will assist me in looking outward.  As Möller argues, images of people in pain denote "power relations" between those watching and those being watched.[3]  My essay asks, what happens when the world looks at images of people being humiliated and tortured for a war that pretends to fight for freedom and liberation?

In many of his documentaries—*The Thin Blue Line* (1988)*, Fog of War* (2003), *Tabloid* (2010)— Morris investigates the persuasive "I see=I believe" and "I see=I experience" formulas that can define viewers' relationships with images and the events they depict. Morris argues, "we think that having seen a part of the whole, that we're seeing everything."[4]  In studying the role of memory in Morris's films, Devin Orgeron and Marsha Orgeron show how Morris investigates an image's capacity to "create the illusion of 'having witnessed.'"[5]  However, if one's understanding of a factual event is solely imagistic and, in turn, illusory, then the moment represented—a moment pulled from its context—begins to detach from reality; at best, the viewer witnesses a simulacrum. Morris maintains that, we, as spectators in a visual culture, "*imagine* that photographs provide a magic path to the truth,"[6] in part, I think, because images allow for quick, at-a-glance encounters with complex events.  Images generate meaning by feeding off the ideologies and experiences of their viewers.  In other words, images rely on us, as viewers, to bring meaning *to them*; however, we often expect images to bring meaning *to us.*

So it's hard to be told that images simply don't have a direct line to "truth" or even to facts.  Yet this is the message Morris has spent his entire career delivering and it is the message that many visual consumers may not want to confront.  In *SOP,* Morris must convince his viewers that though they have seen the Abu Ghraib photos and drawn conclusions about what transpired in the prison, the "real story of Abu Ghraib is in no way contained in those images."[7]  He forces his viewers to look more deliberately at the photos—to study, for instance, what's been cropped out, both in terms of the factual content of individual shots and the realities soldiers experienced when taking the photos.

The Bush Administration's "Shock and Awe Campaign"—which sought to swiftly devastate Saddam's government—became the primary frame for the war effort. Most Americans, still devastated by the 9/11 attacks, supported the war. According to the Pew Research Center, in March 2003, 72% of Americans surveyed believed using military force in Iraq was the "right decision."[8]  The initial public support was, in part, bolstered by the heroic images sent home by hundreds of embedded journalists reporting from the front lines under the protection of the military. However, as Andrew Lindner shows in his content analysis of 742 news articles written by 156 journalists, embedded stories were terribly unbalanced.[9]  When compared to independent journalists and journalists stationed in Baghdad, embedded journalists (who traveled and lived with the troops) were more likely to report on soldiers' deaths and military movements, as well as to use soldiers for information sources.  But they were *less* likely to use Iraqi civilians as sources, or to report on bombings and the resulting

destruction.  Moreover, embedded stories seldom covered civilian casualties; only 11% of the articles Lindner analyzed focused on or even mentioned Iraqi deaths.[10]  The influence of the limited embedded viewpoint is hard to deny, especially since embedded reporters' stories dominated media coverage: "Of the 742 articles within the sample, 63.3 percent were written by journalists embedded with troops…not only did embedded reporting represent a majority of the total *available* press, it dominated public attention. Because embedded reporting was both more affordable to news agencies and more heavily hyped for its novelty, this vantage point dramatically overshadowed the others."[11]  In effect, it was simply difficult to find news stories that offered more balanced depictions of the war.

In discussing his experiences as an embedded journalist, David Ignatius concedes that "embedding comes at a price. We are observing these wars from just one perspective, not seeing them whole."[12]  Indeed, the government and military needed the media's help to broadcast highly orchestrated PR moves to ensure the country developed positive feelings about the war effort (Bush's premature "Mission Accomplished" banner being but one example[13]). Additionally, carefully selected embedded journalists were offered battlefield tours after fighting ceased and casualties were removed from sight.[14] It's not surprising, then, that the public had been unaccustomed to seeing candid images of war when the Abu Ghraib torture pictures came to light in 2004, so the outcry was both intense and, in many ways, uninformed.

In effect, the media and the government deliberately framed the war to garner public support, and, Morris contends, they framed the "bad apples" by blaming them for the mess at Abu Ghraib. As Lindner argues, both the government and the military knew that "after regular exposure to the frame, media consumers come to adopt the framed storyline as their dominant way of thinking about an issue."[15] *SOP* shows that while the Abu Ghraib photos exposed the world to the war's darker reality, the government spun the "bad apple" narrative to safeguard the systemic policies permitting torture.  In his article, "The Effects of the Pictures," Alphonso Lingis focuses on how *little* effect the photos truly had: "No pictures have been propagated more insistently by the media than the pictures of Abu Ghraib; every American saw them…But for the American public, they in the end provoked no question affecting national policy."[16]  Lingis explains that the heavy media coverage devoted to the photos only convinced viewers of their own moral standing against those "few perverts" who took the pictures; moreover, many Americans believed that prisoners held at Abu Ghraib were, as Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld insisted, malicious men who had done something terrible.[17]

As *SOP* demonstrates, *I see* does not equal *I experience* when we look at the Abu Ghraib photos because the prison images cannot stand in for the whole.  Upon being released to the public, the Abu Ghraib images lost their indexical qualities because they no longer possessed a firm relationship with the actual narrative of torture and abuse that took place in the prison.  In response, Morris's film re-directs viewers' attention to what's *missing* from the photos.  To be more specific, a photograph of a soldier standing next to an Iraqi prisoner in distress can invite the viewer to infer that the soldier was responsible for that prisoner's physical state, an inference which may or may not be true.  As Linda Williams writes in her essay, "Cluster Fuck: The Forcible Frame in Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*," "On first seeing these pictures, few people thought they needed further explanations of a frame of reference."[18]  The

images foreground the poorly disciplined "bad apples," yet missing from the photos are people who legitimized the events at the prison—people like John Yoo, who, as Deputy Assistant Attorney General, wrote the now-infamous "Torture Memos" that created a legal path for enhanced interrogation techniques.[19]

As noted by Jeffrey Chown, the Iraq War is "the first 'digital war,'" turning soldiers into amateur documentarians.[20]  Soldiers replaced the traditional wartime letters that documented so many previous wars with photographs that show, as Susan Sontag has observed, "their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities."[21]  They collected images to prove their "thereness" in the war.  Indeed, the Abu Ghraib photos' lack of professionalism—their poor framing, lack of focus, and bad lighting—gave them an even greater authenticity.  In effect, the grittier the photos, the more amateurish and spontaneous they felt, the more easily the images could seduce viewers into confusing the image with reality.  Sontag concludes that "something becomes real…by being photographed."[22]  *SOP* seeks to determine how the reality of war was created in Abu Ghraib and whether that reality was actually more of a fantasy.

### *Sanitizing Images: The Visual Context Surrounding Iraq*

Shortly after the United States bombed Baghdad in March 2003, the Bush Administration began enforcing a policy preventing the dissemination of images of dead soldiers arriving on military bases.  In a *Washington Post* article, Dana Milbank provided some context for this mandate, "since the end of the Vietnam War, presidents have worried that their military actions would lose support once the public glimpsed the remains of U.S. soldiers arriving at air bases in flag-draped caskets."[23]  Certainly, the government's anxiety about war images can be traced to the belief that showing these images runs the risk of American voters identifying the abstract concept of war with the very real understanding of American casualties. "The understanding of war among people who have not experienced war," Sontag observed, "is now chiefly a product of" war footage shown in the media.[24]  By controlling which images are shown, the government can also influence how Americans experience the war as well as whether they continue to support it.

The federal government's policy was challenged when Russ Kick, a 34-year-old writer who, as Kick himself declared, devoted his time to "digging up things actively suppressed or ignored," filed a Freedom of Information Act request on November 6, 2003.[25]  He petitioned to receive, "All photographs showing caskets (or other devices) containing the remains of US military personnel at Dover AFB.  This would include, but not be limited to, caskets arriving, caskets departing, and any funerary rites/rituals being performed" at the Dover Air Force Base, the military's largest mortuary.[26]  After his initial request was denied, he successfully appealed the decision and the Air Force sent him a CD-ROM containing 361 photographs taken by Department of Defense photographers.  He subsequently posted the images on his website, TheMemoryHole.org, which featured the tagline, "Rescuing Knowledge, Freeing Information."[27]  In the days after Kick posted the images, he received nine million hits to his website.

Soon after images depicting American soldiers' coffins graced newspapers and news shows across the country, the program "Nightline" devoted an entire episode to

reading the names and displaying photographs of the 721 soldiers who had died in Iraq and Afghanistan.  Ted Koppel, the program's news anchor, said his decision to produce the show was inspired by an issue of *Life Magazine* that printed the pictures of soldiers who had died in Vietnam during the course of one week.  While Koppel saw the show as a way to honor fallen soldiers, other media conglomerates, like the Sinclair Broadcast Group (a known Bush supporter) saw the program as "motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq."[28]  As reported in *The New York Times*, Sinclair "one of the country's largest owners of local television stations, pre-empted the broadcast from its eight ABC-affiliated stations, saying the program amounted to an antiwar statement."[29]  Instead, Sinclair chose to have its stations run an episode of the sitcom, "Dharma and Greg," which, at the time, outraged Senator John McCain.[30]

The "Nightline" program was very minimalist in terms of production values; the entire forty minutes was devoted to Koppel methodically reading the names of the dead as their photos were shown "two at a time, just enough to register a name, an age, and shock at how young—and how old—some were."[31]  When "Nightline" could not obtain a portrait, the program instead showed a Department of Defense photograph of a flag-draped coffin that Kick legally obtained.  The critical response to the "Nightline" program as well as the government's refusal to show images of soldiers' coffins both point to an anxiety regarding the emotional response that war images can invoke.  No one really knows *how* to respond to images of suffering and pain.  Ultimately, viewers may, as Möller argues, experience "the inadequacy of [their] own response," especially if they don't know how to end the suffering they see.[32] Images of war casualties can particularize war and compel viewers to translate the abstract idea of death into something sensory and concrete.

In the introduction to their edited collection, *Ethics and Images of Pain*, Asbjørn Grøstad and Henrik Gustafsson ask what happens when we see images of people suffering:  Do we look away?  Do we engage?  Do we try to speak for the victims?  Do we intervene?  The authors argue that "the sum of the individual responses [to images of human suffering]—each of which may very well be inadequate in that it neither directly nor immediately contributes to alleviate the suffering depicted—ultimately forms an adequate response of individuals acting together with members of the discursively constituted political public, thus exerting power."[33]  When the Abu Ghraib images were covered by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* in May 2004,[34] the government worked to frame the discussion and to ensure an *inadequate* response from the public.  For instance, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld refused to use the word "torture" to describe the photographs, and instead searched for euphemisms ("abuse," "humiliation") during press conferences.[35] As recounted by Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites in *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy,* much of the violence depicted in the images had already been covered by print media (working from Red Cross reports, for instance), yet "most citizens apparently were not doing their reading, and many still believed the government had clean hands."[36]

Since the beginning of the Iraq War, filmmakers have worked to capture compelling war images that contribute to a larger historical narrative.  Films like *Gunner Palace* (2004), *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005), and *Restrepo* (2010) attempt to bring home the realities of war.  Yet the construction of images—such as the consequences of

framing a shot, what's outside the frame, whom a filmmaker chooses to interview—are seldom subject to deeper and more critical investigations by the filmmakers; war images themselves aren't the subjects of the films. Rather, the films lean on a *cinema verité,* "cameras-on-the-ground" visual style, and offer what are framed as truthful and factual depictions of war. They rely on the "I see=I experience" style of meaning-making for the viewers. When *SOP* (tagline: "The war on terror will be photographed") was released in 2008, the public and the media had already reached settled conclusions about the notorious soldiers featured in those images. Some of them had gone to prison, most had been dishonorably discharged, and no one with real power (no one from the CIA or the upper-levels of the Bush Administration) had been held responsible. Case closed.

Yet, nothing about those images was truly settled. Despite the initial public outcry, Morris argued that no one really "clarified the relationship between the photos and what happened" in the Abu Ghraib prison.[37] Morris sought to better understand the political and institutional context surrounding the Abu Ghraib images. Were the photos taken by a group of rogue soldiers who lacked self-control? Or did the photos document systemic abuse that had been tacitly approved and even encouraged by those in power? Morris clearly believes the latter. Imbedded within the images of abuse and torture, he detects an inappropriate degree of attention directed towards "a very small group of people who were responsible for little or nothing, and directed away from people who were far more complicit in what happened in that prison."[38]

Williams argues that Morris's film "seeks to understand the epistemological frame of crimes of war"[39] by investigating the literal frame of the images. By doing so, Morris can begin to question what happened outside of them. As *SOP* illustrates, digital cameras enabled soldiers to distance themselves from the surreal madness enveloping the prison. As Williams writes, these soldiers, "who sought a vantage point that would dissociate them from the prisoners with whom they lived," looked at their immediate surroundings on a digital screen and could finally cope.[40] They could interact with the images as a sort of historical document (albeit one occurring in real-time) and locate themselves outside the acts of torture and abuse they witnessed and sometimes participated in—acts for which they would eventually be held responsible. The photos not only depicted criminal acts; rather, they were, Williams continues, a "legitimate expression of the frustration of [the soldiers'] own impotency, their own inability to act successfully as soldiers, their pathetic imitation of 'norms' that utterly failed to tell them their duty."[41] The soldiers merely captured their experiences, not unlike anyone else who finds themselves in unbelievable and fantastic circumstances. As the soldiers themselves explain in *SOP,* capturing and distributing images became a distraction from the chaos surrounding them.

In turn, *SOP* uses these same images and accompanying witness testimony to help viewers (re)engage with the Iraq War. The film encourages viewers to establish a closer proximity to the torturous acts by questioning their previous knowledge and beliefs about the Iraq War and about Abu Ghraib. Morris's directorial style, as I discuss below, asks viewers to confront the torturers with empathy. I want to extend Williams's argument that explores how "images of death and torture are literally and metaphorically framed by the people who take them….and by the publics who see them."[42] In effect, I argue that *SOP* asks audiences to push against the war's institutionally supported frame. The film wants audiences to look outside its

boundaries, to consider not just who took the Abu Ghraib photographs, but to understand the realities that the photos both reflect and hide.  These photos depict a certain truth, one that reveals a glimpse into not only the day-to-day lives of a handful of soldiers at the prison, but also into the military's interrogation policies.  As Military Police Specialist Megan Ambuhl Graner explains at the end of the film, soldiers have to follow orders: if you don't, "you're gonna get into trouble, and if you do, obviously you end up in trouble."[43]  What can we, as viewers of the Abu Ghraib photos and, subsequently, as viewers of *SOP*, claim to know about Abu Ghraib? About the Iraq War?  About our own role as spectators?

### Looking Outside the Image

*SOP* begins with an image of playing cards.  We see the Ace of Hearts and the Ace of Clubs featuring Uday and Qusay Hussein's faces falling in slow motion before dramatically crashing onto a wooden table.  Former Brigadier General Janice Karpinski begins to explain in voiceover that Saddam's two sons had just been killed.  This opening scene—which is reminiscent of a re-enactment, but doesn't quite fit that category—positions the film as being stylistically and tonally deliberate.  By beginning his film with two playing cards taken from a deck that essentially served as the military's "Most Wanted" list, Morris instantly conveys the game-like nature of the war and of the Abu Ghraib prison. In effect, the military was already in the business of trading images so perhaps it's not such a stretch to understand why soldiers would follow suit.

The film was released long after punishments for the Abu Ghraib events were doled out. Thus, both the viewers and the film's subjects are acutely aware that *SOP* is constructed of testimony being delivered by people whom, as Williams notes, "many of [the viewers] already believe to be war criminals."[44]  Thus, the soldiers' job, and, in turn, Morris's, becomes that of persuasion: they need to coax viewers into believing that the Abu Ghraib images they have seen are not to be taken at face value, and that military personnel who served prison time for offenses such as aggravated assault, dereliction of duty, and mistreatment of prisoners, are, in fact, believable.  While Morris may be asking a lot of his viewers, I contend that audiences accept this challenge because *SOP* encourages them to parse through details and testimony as though they were putting the subjects on trial.  For instance, in discussing a photo of Lynndie England holding a dog leash attached to a prisoner, Megan Ambuhl Graner explains, "They were trying to say she was dragging him, which never occurred.  I was there and I know it didn't happen."[45]  The "they" in Ambuhl Graner's statement is somewhat unclear.  Is she referring to the army and the courts?  Is she referring to the media?  Or is she referring to the viewers themselves, people who have already drawn conclusions about the image?

While Morris's film ostensibly focuses on Abu Ghraib and the Iraq war, it also presents viewers with more candid, lighter images, some of which may elicit uneasy laughter from viewers.  Scenes showing soldiers goofing around and playing pranks on one another bring a human quality to the film. In effect, Morris asks viewers to see his subjects as people, contrasting their portrayal in the media as criminals.  Yet, the film also asks viewers to reconsider the link between seeing and believing at a time when Army Specialist Charles Graner was still serving a ten-year prison sentence for his crimes.[46] Indeed, his absence in *SOP* is felt.  We see images of him, we hear his wife,

Megan Ambuhl Graner, as well as his ex-lover, Lynndie England, speak about him—but we never hear from him.  In many ways, his absence allows the film to position him as a villain of sorts because it's much tougher to empathize with a subject who is never on camera.

Perhaps because he handles images with such suspicion and caution, Morris seems to lend credence to the letters that Sabrina Harman wrote to her wife, Kelly, while stationed at Abu Ghraib.  Early in the film, Harman's voiceover reads the letters as they appear on the screen in extreme close-up.[47]  The camera often circles around the letters in a slow overheard arc shot or gradually tracks across them, movement that can feel somewhat dizzying and disorienting, in part because the viewer doesn't know who is speaking or why these letters are significant.  Morris also plays with the lighting in these shots: the letters appear to be backlit, which gives them a yellowish-sepia tone; they are heavy with deep shadows.  Indeed, the lighting techniques seem reminiscent of the "masking" used in early black and white films.  Sometimes, as Harman is reading, the entire letter slowly becomes ensconced in darkness and another letter slowly fades into the frame. The lighting brings a dramatic and even candid quality to these letters.  They seem aged—like historical documents that would be found deep in a library's archive, and, as such, are somehow credible.  These heavily stylized scenes are far-removed from the *cinema verité* approach found in more conventional war documentaries.

While Morris maintains the Ken Burns-esque approach to soldiers quaintly reading letters written to loved ones, he departs from this tone quickly; he asks us not to feel nostalgia for the soldier on the front-lines, but to question the dark circumstances under which Harman's letters were written.  In other words, Harman is not relating tales of heroic conquests or complaining about how much she misses her wife.  She is reporting abject abuse and horror.  The close-up shots of the letters are often intercut with re-enactments of the narrative that Harman retells.  Morris's filmic approach gives their testimony a gravity that would not be achieved with a simple interview.  Harman's calm, even-toned voiceover shapes how we react when she makes eye contact with us in an interview a few minutes later to tell us about the environment surrounding the photos she took.

As has been well-documented, Morris conducts interviews with his own invention, the "Interrotron," a two-way video teleconferencer that compels his films' subjects to look directly into the camera while speaking.  In some moments, viewers may feel like they are having a one-on-one conversation with the subjects, while in other moments, they may feel like jurists sorting through evidence.  Notably, viewers don't actually *see* Harman interviewed on the Interrotron until five minutes after encountering her letters.  This narrative arrangement, it seems, asks viewers to withhold their judgment of Harman (who became notorious for giving the camera a "thumbs up" while posing over a dead Iraqi) until we better understand her viewpoint.

However, *SOP* doesn't always sustain eye contact between the viewer and the subjects.  For instance, during one thirty-six second interview with Military Police Sergeant Jamal Davis early in the film, Morris cuts into—but not away from—the interview four times.[48]  After each cut, Davis reappears in a slightly different location in the frame.  These very quick cuts almost equate to a "blink" that enables the viewer to refresh her vision before moving further into the testimony.  On the other hand, there

are also scenes where the eye contact can be almost too intense. For instance, Karpinski seems to stare down the Interrotron. Her unrelenting eye contact, combined with her resolute and angry demeanor, are almost too much to take in; it's hard not to break her gaze. While it's clear that she is furious with her superiors, she almost seems to take her frustration out on the film's viewers, as though they were the ones who didn't treat her with the respect and decorum she thinks she's earned.

During at least two points in the film, Morris uses the Interrotron to display Abu Ghraib images to his interviewees. First, he shows Lynndie England an image of her holding a dog leash attached to a prisoner's neck.[49] Here, England's eye contact leaves the viewer for a moment while both she and the film's viewers study the image's details together, including the fact that Ambuhl Graner, who was cropped out of the image by some news outlets, is standing on the edge of the photo. Morris also shows an image to Roman Krohl, a Military Intelligence Interrogator, and asks him to identify the individuals in the photograph.[50] After studying the image for thirty seconds, Krohl's eye contact switches from the photos back to the film's spectators. In these two moments, viewers are reminded that they are collaborating with the film's subjects to interpret these images. Slowly, over the course of the entire film, the viewer establishes an uneasy trust with the Abu Ghraib soldiers whereas, at the beginning of the film, the relationship could best be described as unreceptive or distant.

However, *SOP* does not let its subjects off the hook for the role they played in abusing prisoners. Morris's re-enactments of the abuse are often brutal and difficult to watch. For instance, Ken Davis, a Military Police Sergeant, describes an interrogation he witnessed where soldiers forced a prisoner to undress "and then they [made] him low crawl, [made] him try to drag his genitals onto the concrete."[51] Morris depicts this scene using a nude actor, whose face is often out of focus, crawling slowly and in slow-motion along a wet, concrete floor; a male soldier stands behind him, out of focus, holding a baton. Exaggerated sounds of the prison environment combined with the sound of the prisoner's belabored breathing echo throughout the scene (and the theater).

In a later scene, both Tim Dugan, a Civilian Interrogator, and Harman describe the mistreatment of an Iraqi general who had been brought to the prison.[52] The interrogators shaved the man's eyebrows, an act Morris reenacts in extreme close up. Viewers watch a plastic razor being roughly pulled across the bushy eyebrow of what appears to be an elderly man (Harman describes him as being "like a grandfather, very respectful"[53]). The eyebrow and the razor fill the entire frame. This scene communicates the role of humiliation in interrogation unlike any other in the film. Re-enactments of the iconic "man on the box" are also filmed using a combination of extreme close-up shots, slow motion, and dramatic lighting and shadows. We see the man's dirty fingers being wrapped with wires and his calloused feet trying to balance on the narrow MRE boxes (he had falsely been told he would be electrocuted if he fell). Morris intercuts images of the man with close-ups of a digital camera taking photos. Harman explains that the "wires were taken off after photos were taken" at which point Morris cuts away from the re-enactment to the soldiers' own images.[54]

Perhaps because Morris pioneered the use of re-enactments and dramatizations in documentaries with his film *The Thin Blue Line*, he has been questioned for overly relying on the techniques to convey "truth." In using reenactments, Morris intentionally

violates the purist documentarian stance which favors minimal directorial intervention, but in doing so, his films paradoxically feel *more* honest because he draws attention to and questions the filmic apparatus—and the genre—itself.  Morris's reenactments question, challenge, or even verify his subjects' viewpoints.  As Orgeron and Orgeron have noted, Morris's visual style – including his direct "authorial intrusion"—"leads to a documentary that foregrounds multiplicity and does not avow its ties to the fictional world."[55]  Morris has argued that "posing"—by way of moving or removing objects within a scene, or adjusting the lighting, coloring, or sound—has been and always will be part of photography and film, and that posing "is not necessarily deception.  Deception is deception."[56]  The reenactments require critical viewer engagement and, just like the Abu Ghraib photos themselves, should not be regarded as detached truth-tellers.  Rather, they ask viewers to make meaning not just of what they can see within a shot, but to also interpret what's missing.

By sorting through reenactments, interrotronned interviews, and the film's overall visual elements, viewers can begin to understand the true complexity of interpreting images—even Morris's. The actors in Morris's reenactments never speak and their faces are always out of focus.  They are frequently shot in close-up (and at times, extreme close-up), which seems to force viewers to encounter the event being depicted more so than the people participating in that event.  The actor serves to illustrate—to enact—the testimony being delivered by the films' subjects.

Unlike *SOP's* reenactments, the CIA, Navy Seals, and Other Governmental Agencies (OGAs) at Abu Ghraib sought to deceive.  As Ken Davis recounts, when someone of importance visited the prison, military personnel would put on "a dog and pony show"[57] and the reality of Abu Ghraib would momentarily shift as prisoners got their clothes and mattresses returned to them.  Further, when Manadel al-Jamadi died during a CIA interrogation at Abu Ghraib, the CIA put an I.V. in the dead man's arm so they could get him out of the prison without starting a riot. The only person convicted of any crime related to his death was Harman, who photographed the dead man's body and posed with it.  This unwise choice comes to represent even further deception because anyone who saw the photo of Harman and al-Jamadi out of context likely assumed that she killed him, yet Morris shows us "the photograph misdirects us."[58]  In mistaking Harman for the killer, the real killers went undetected.

The climax of *SOP* arrives when Brent Pack, a Special Agent with the Army's Criminal Investigation Division, determines if the Abu Ghraib photos depicted criminal acts. As Pack discusses the criteria for a criminal act—physical injury, sexual humiliation or abuse, failing to stop prisoners from harming themselves, etc.—Morris stamps the words "Criminal Act" or "S.O.P," backed by the sound of gunfire, on top of the photograph.  This scene comes ninety minutes into the film, after the viewers have confronted difficult images that they likely concluded would be classified as torture, including the image of the man on the box that Pack labeled "S.O.P."  He explains that he has been in the army for twenty years, including spending four months at Guantanamo Bay, and that "people who haven't been where I've been, I can't expect them to see the pictures in the same way."[59]  Yet, as a viewer, it's impossible not to be outraged with Pack's classifications.  If Morris wants us to trust the beliefs we form as a result of what we see, then we have to question the information conveyed throughout his film, too.  Images direct attention to certain elements of an experience or event, but they also misdirect and, in some instances, can deceive uncritical viewers.

In looking at these images of torture, we are ultimately forced to question our own role in the war effort.  Do we look at the images and feel complicit in their violence, do we feel obligated to take action, or do we look away and continue on with our lives?  In his "Preface" to the collection, *Ethics and Images of Pain*, J.M. Bernstein argues that it is nearly impossible to think of an image of someone in pain where the "correct response is to not look."[60]  Images should compel us to *act*, to make new meanings and new interpretations of situations we thought we understood.  Bernstein continues, "the question can never be solely: how has this image failed?  Always there is a further better question: how have we failed this image?  What must I/we do to live up to its claims and demands?"[61]

I think Morris's film speak to these same questions.  Do we trust Pack when he deems a torturous act committed during a war our government is fighting on our behalf as simply Standard Operating Procedure and then move on?  Or do we recalibrate?  Do we come up with an understanding of the image that compels us to tell our government that we don't think war and torture must be paired in order for the war effort to be successful (however "success" is defined)?  As Morris writes, the Abu Ghraib images do not tell the whole story: "The photographs are the start of a trail of evidence, but *not* the end."[62]  As has been documented by multiple journalists and scholars, and as the U.S. government's own "Torture Memos" later revealed, the abusive treatment prisoners suffered at the hands of American soldiers was sanctioned by leaders at the highest levels, while those who received jail sentences were at the lowest, most vulnerable, military levels.  The photos depicted these low-ranking enlisted men and women, thereby making it harder to deny their innocence, unless we look outside the image for the more complex, textured, and accurate meanings.

Morris's approach to filming bygone and generally settled historical events requires his viewers to question their previous understandings of those moments.  *SOP* ultimately maintains that the events viewers think they see depicted by an image may not actually be part of that instant in time at all.  The memories created by the image may be false.  Morris's films subsist in a liminal space where truth and lies are always already constructs and every image is simultaneously true and false.   And it is this gray area that compels Morris to encourage viewers to keep returning to facts, to what has been proven about a given moment in time.  Only from this vantage point we can begin digging around the margins of the facts to shine some light on the unknowns.

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[2] Frank Möller, "Associates in Crime and Guilt," *Ethics and Images of Pain*, eds. Asbjørn Grøstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012) 17.

[3] Ibid., 24.

[4] Morris, quoted in Joshua Oppenheimer, "Misunderstanding Images: *Standard Operating Procedure*, Errol Morris," *Killer Images: Documentary Film and the Performance of Violence*, eds. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012) 311.

[5] Devin Orgeron and Marsha Orgeron, "Megattronic Memories: Errol Morris and the Politics of Witnessing," *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. Brian Winston (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) 242.

[6] Morris 92.  Emphasis Original.

[7] Morris, quoted in Joshua Oppenheimer, 311.

[8] Notably, by February 2008, that number dropped to 38%.
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[9] Andrew M. Lindner, "Among the Troops: Seeing the Iraq War Through Three Journalistic Vantage Points," *Social Problems*, 56 1 (2009): 36.

[10] Ibid., 35.

[11] Ibid., 41.  Emphasis Original.

[12] David Ignatius, "The Dangers of Embedded Journalism, in War and Politics."
*WashingtonPost.com*, May 2, 2010.  http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/30/AR2010043001100.html  <accessed October 12, 2013>

[13]  For further examples of sanitized media depictions of war, see the "dramatic rescue" of American soldier Jessica Lynch or the questionable circumstances surrounding the death of former NFL player Pat Tillman.

[14] Lindner 44.

[15] Lindner 25.

[16] Alphonso Lingis, "The Effects of the Pictures."  *Journal of Visual Culture* 5 83 (2006): 84.

[17] Ibid., 84.

[18] Linda Williams, "Cluster Fuck: The Forcible Frame in Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*." *Camera Obscura* 25 1 (2010): 58.

[19] John Yoo, "Memo Regarding the Torture and Military Interrogation of Alien Unlawful Combatants Held Outside the United States," ACLU.org, March 14, 2003. https://www.aclu.org/national-security/memo-regarding-torture-and-military-interrogation-alien-unlawful-combatants-held-o  <accessed November 16, 2013>

[20] Jeffrey Chown, "Documentary and the Iraq War," *Why We Fought: America's Wars In Film and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington:  The University Press of Kentucky, 2008) 458.

[21] Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm  <accessed on April 28, 2013>

[22] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 21.

[23] Dana Milbank, "Curtains Ordered for Media Coverage of Returning Coffins," *WashingtonPost.com*, October 21, 2003. http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5036.htm <accessed on August 26, 2013>

[24]  Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 21.

[25] Roger Cohen, "Images of Coffins Bring War Home to America."  *New York Times*, April 28, 2004.  http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/28/international/28GLOB.html  <accessed on May 11, 2013>

[26] Russ Kick, TheMemoryHole.org  <accessed on May 3, 2004>

[27] According to Wikipedia, the Memory Hole website's last post was in June 2009.  I haven't been able to access it for a few years.  Different Memory Hole blogs and other sites have since been created.

[28] Associated Press.  "Names of U.S. War Dead Read on 'Nightline,'" *Today.com*, May 1, 2004. http://www.today.com/id/4864247#.UokZjiTaj1s  <accessed November 17, 2013>

[29] Alessandra Stanley, "A Roll Call That Spoke for Itself, Without Added Justification."  *New York Times*, May 2, 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/02/nyregion/the-tv-watch-a-roll-call-that-spoke-for-itself-without-added-justification.html <accessed on May 11, 2013>

[30] "'Nightline' Airs War Dead Amid Controversy," *CNN.com*, May, 1, 2004. http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/TV/05/01/abc.nightline/ <accessed on November 17, 2013.

[31] Alessandra Stanley.

[32] Möller 27.

[33] Möller 23.

[34] Seymour Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker,* May 10, 2004.
http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact  <accessed October 13, 2013>

[35] Sontag, "Regarding the Torture."

[36] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007): 292.

[37] Morris 118.

[38] Morris, quoted in Oppenheimer, 313-314.

[39] Williams 36.

[40] Morris 49.

[41] Ibid., 49.

[42] Williams 31.

[43] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 1:43:13.

[44]  Williams 34.

[45] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 13:52.

[46] Graner was released from the United States Disciplinary Barracks in 2011, after serving six years of a 10 ½ year sentence.

[47] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 5:26.

[48] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 7:39-8:15.

[49]  *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 15:13.

[50] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 30:30.

[51] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 29:50.

[52] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 35:00.

[53] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 35:38.

[54] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 42:38.

[55] Orgeron and Orgeron 239.

[56] Morris, "Believing," 56.

[57] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 50:12

[58] Morris 118.

[59] *SOP* DVD Timestamp: 1:29:28.

[60] J.M. Bernstein, "Preface,"*Ethics and Images of Pain*, eds. Asbjørn Grøstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2012) xiii.

[61] Ibid., xiii-xiv.

[62] Morris 117.