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## The 'Afghan Girls': media representations and frames of war

Vera Mackie

*University of Wollongong*, vera@uow.edu.au

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## **The ‘Afghan Girls’:**

### **Media Representations and Frames of War**

**Vera Mackie**

**University of Wollongong**

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The operation of cameras, not only in the recording and distribution of images of torture, but as part of the very apparatus of bombing, make it clear that media representations have already become modes of military conduct. So there is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation. The perceptual realities produced through such frames do not precisely lead to war policy, and neither do such policies unilaterally create frames of perception. Perception and policy are but two modalities of the same process whereby the ontological status of a targeted population is compromised and suspended (Butler, 2009, p. 29).

In May 2011 it was reported that Osama Bin Laden had been killed by US Navy Seals in Pakistan. Almost immediately there was controversy over whether the government should release photographs of Bin Laden’s corpse, with President Obama deciding that it would be inappropriate to release the photographs. What we did get to see was a photograph of the White House Situation Room, showing the grim faces of the President, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior staff as they watched real-time footage from the mission (‘A View to a Kill’, 2011, pp. 26–7). In the absence of any photographs of Bin Laden, it was the situation room photograph which was immediately analysed – and soon parodied (Achenbach 2011; ‘Breaking down the Situation Room’ 2011). This is just one example of a controversy about visual representation which underlines Judith Butler’s point that media representations have become ‘modes of military conduct’ (Butler, 2009, p. 29), particularly in the decade of the so-called ‘war on terror’.

Much of the controversy about photography hinges on depictions of violence, including the photographs of tortured prisoners in Abu Ghraib, photographs of the corpse of executed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, and the unseen pictures of the execution of Osama Bin Laden. In this essay, however, I will argue that even apparently innocent and benign photographs can also play a part in the representational regime of militarism. This essay was prompted, however, not by the unseen photographs of Osama Bin Laden, but by a very visible and widely circulated depiction of the effects of violence.

The cover of *Time* Magazine of 9 August 2010 displayed the photograph of a young Afghan woman. After running away from an abusive marriage, she had been attacked and mutilated by the men of her community. The photograph is in portrait style, showing her dark hair partially obscured by her veil, and unflinchingly showing her mutilated face. In February 2011 the photograph was awarded the World Press Prize for photography (ABC News 2011). My essay has been prompted by my questioning of the ethics of displaying such a photograph in the international media. However, in order to provide a reading of this photograph, it will be necessary to place it in a whole series of photographs of Afghan women which have been deployed over recent years. In tracing the genealogy of such photographs I will pay particular attention to the photographs of three women. The first is an unnamed young woman who was photographed at the beginning of the US Occupation of Afghanistan in late 2001. The second is Sharbat Gula, who has come to be known as the 'Afghan Girl' – she first appeared on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine in 1985, and again in 2002. The third is Bibi Aisha, the woman whose photograph appeared on the front cover of *Time* magazine in August 2010.

The photographs emanate from a few first world media organisations –*National*

*Geographic, Magnum, Reuters, Time-Warner* – and are disseminated globally through newspapers, news magazines, cable and satellite news, broadcast news, and internet news outlets. All of the photographs are intimately connected with the occupation of Afghanistan by the US and its allies, but tell us more about the US and its perceived place in the world than they do about the actual experiences of the people of Afghanistan. Only one of the photographs I will be considering here explicitly depicts the effects of violence. However, I argue that even the apparently innocent and upbeat photographs of newly unveiled women at the start of the invasion of Afghanistan contributed to a particular regime of representation which positions the US as sovereign and powerful, with the right to intervene in other nations. The three photographs and their intertexts all contribute to the constitution of this representational regime, despite apparent differences in subject matter, style and tone of address.

In using the phrase ‘regime of representation’, I follow Stuart Hall’s definition of a ‘discursive’ approach to the analysis of cultural representation.

[The discursive approach] examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied. The emphasis in the *discursive* approach is always on the historical specificity of a particular form or ‘regime’ of representation: not on language as a general concern, but on specific *languages* or meanings, and how they are deployed at particular times, in particular places. It points us towards greater historical specificity – the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice (2007, p. 6).

Like Griselda Pollock (1994, pp. 1–42) and others, I argue that discourse analysis can also be applied to visual representations. In the same way as we can analyse the series of ‘possible statements’ in written language, we can analyse visual representations for what is shown and not shown, and link these practices of ‘showing’ and ‘not showing’ with the associated

power relations. Pictures, too, involve representational practices which operate in concrete historical situations. A discursive approach also moves away from analysing individual photographs for a definitive reading, in favour of a genealogical approach which places each photograph in the context of other photographs and other texts. Looking at a series of photographs over time can reveal regularity and recursivity in the deployment of particular visual tropes. Although most of the representations analysed here come from the relatively recent past, I analyse them from the perspective of a cultural historian.

Afghanistan has suffered under a series of conflicts in the latter half of the twentieth century. In geopolitical terms, Afghanistan is placed at one of the crossroads of 'East' and 'West' (in both senses of that somewhat outdated opposition): between Europe and Asia, and between the former Soviet bloc and the Euro-American sphere of influence. It is close to the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, and a major node for the trade in the products of the opium poppy. An earlier war had placed Afghanistan under the control of the Soviet Union, and after the breakup of the Soviet Union the country had come under the control of a series of factions, culminating in the regime of the Taliban. There is thus an extensive archive of reportage and photographic representations of the land, the people, the various conflicts, and the refugees from the region.

For most of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Afghanistan has been the focus of the so-called 'war on terror' in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The US and its allies justified the invasion of Afghanistan on the grounds that Osama Bin Laden and members of Al Qaida were believed to be hiding there. A further justification was the Taliban's mistreatment of Afghan women. For many years before the 'war on terror', non-governmental organisations had been circulating information about the oppressive

conditions suffered by women under the Taliban regime. In those years, there was no move to intervene in this situation from the United States, its allies, or the United Nations. Some time after the decision to bomb Afghanistan had been made, however, the figure of the oppressed Afghan woman was invoked, and 'First Lady' Laura Bush even emerged from her own domestic space to make what was then a rare public speech calling for support for the 'war against terror' in the name of 'saving' Afghan women (White House, 2001).

### **An Icon of Youth**

When the 'war on terror' was (prematurely) deemed to have achieved a measure of success, and the Taliban were in retreat, the symbol of this campaign was the newly unveiled woman. The international news media ran special editions with titles like 'Kabul Unveiled' and 'Afghanistan Unveiled' (Stanmeyer, 2001; 'Beneath the Veil', 2001).

Yannis Behrakis is a photographer for the Reuters news agency who covered the invasion of Afghanistan, and is regularly 'embedded' in military campaigns. His photographs depict the advancing tanks, the people of Kabul shopping in the market place, the women of Afghanistan in their blue burqas. Behrakis' photographs were widely syndicated, and he won several awards for his coverage of 'the liberation of Kabul' (War Photo Limited, undated). On 15 November 2001, the *International Herald Tribune* reported on the defeat of the Taliban, and the story was illustrated with Behrakis' photograph of an unveiled young woman, surrounded by a crowd of other women wearing the distinctive blue burqas. The young woman's clothes are red and white, meaning that the photograph is largely composed of the colours red, white and blue: the colours of the US stars and stripes flag or the French *tricolore*. Above the photograph is the headline 'Free to Lift the Veil' ('Free to Lift the Veil', 2001).<sup>1</sup> The headline's invocation of the concept of 'freedom' was entirely congruent with

the justification for the ‘war against terror’. ‘Freedom’ had been identified as being one of the core values of the United States and its allies, and the veil functioned as a convenient visual metaphor for the lack of freedom which was identified with Islamic regimes. Reuters’ coverage of the war in Afghanistan was collected in a book with the predictable title of *Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil*. Indeed, one seldom noted by-product of the ‘war on terror’ was a proliferation of what can only be called ‘coffee table books’ – heavy on photographs and often light on text. Similar commemorative volumes and editions were produced by the *New York Times* (Lee et al, 2002), *Life* and *National Geographic*. These were followed by countless collections of photographs and testimonials of Afghan women. In the Reuters’ book, Behrakis reflected on his photograph.

It was November 14, a day after the Taliban had fled Kabul. I was walking through the city in the early morning looking for signs of change. A group of about 100 women waited outside a bakery for food coupons. It was an extraordinary moment. I saw an unveiled face of a woman in a sea of burqas and shot a single frame. Then I put the camera down and stared at her. She had a mysterious smile; she looked back at me with a brave and resolute face. The morning sun seemed gently to stroke her cheek for the first time in five years. I was suddenly overcome by a feeling that I was witnessing colossal change. Her face sent back to me a wave of hope for the people of Afghanistan (Reuters 2002, p. 196).

In the photographer’s account, his own desires seem to be displaced on to the ‘morning sun’ which ‘stroked her cheek for the first time in five years’. In what would become a convention of the genre, one unveiled woman is surrounded by other still-veiled women, promising yet more future scenes of unveiling. The viewer of these scenes of unveiling is placed in the position of voyeur, experiencing pleasure at the sight of one unveiled woman and desire for the unveiling of the other women. The woman in Behrakis’ photograph does not speak. Rather, it is the photographer who fantasises that she has been waiting, veiled, until he could come to photograph her. (He has no way of knowing whether or not she has

been veiled for the last five years. It may well be that she is simply not yet of the age when veiling would be expected.) His fantasy about stroking the face of the unveiled woman uncannily echoes the fetishism of his Orientalist forebears.<sup>2</sup> Scholar and translator Edward Lane, for example, on approaching the shores of Egypt, said that he ‘felt like a groom about to lift the veil from his bride’ (Lane, 1973 [1860]).<sup>3</sup>

The unnamed woman in Behrakis’ photograph functions as an icon. This is no longer just a photograph of one individual, fortuitously snapped on a November day as she waits outside the bakery. She has become a symbol. Photographs of children or young people are often used as signifiers of political change, as is the dawn. In addition to the trope of unveiling, then, several elements of this photograph signify change and renewal: sunlight, the dawn and youth (Mackie 2005, pp. 121–142).

The icon of the veiled woman stands for the people, the land, and the nation-state of Afghanistan. The deployment of a female figure as metonym for the nation, however, means that any narratives of the invasion of the nation, attacks on the nation, defeat of the nation, and what has been termed the ‘liberation’ of the nation, are also expressed in terms of gendered metaphors (Mackie 2009: 80–106). The veiled woman stands in for the mystery of the Middle East; the desire to unveil the woman stands in for the desire to achieve full knowledge of her nation. The photographer who reveals the face of the unveiled woman is a metaphor and metonym of the ‘saving’ of the nation from the oppressive Taliban regime by the armed forces of the United States and its allies. Such representations also, then, construct first world masculinity in opposition to third world femininity. In the popular imaginary, war photographers are similar to soldiers. They are often embedded in military campaigns, their work is highly dangerous, and many war photographers have been injured or killed in combat

situations (Keller 2011).

In another of Behrakis' photographs, the foreground is taken up by the figure of a woman in a pleated blue burqa, silhouetted against the sand and the sky. In the background is a military tank. The juxtaposition of the veiled woman and the tank neatly condenses one narrative of the war – that the troops were engaged in a conflict over the fate of Afghan's women. This connection is clear in the photograph of the woman and the tank, but I would argue that even the upbeat photograph of the young woman in front of the bakery is ultimately connected with vindication of the invasion of Afghanistan. It was this invasion which Behrakis was in the country to document.

Many of the scenes of unveiling were staged in beauty salons, with women applying cosmetics and having their hair styled. The prohibition of cosmetics was seen as just one more symptom of the oppressiveness of the Taliban regime, and cosmetics were seen as a sign of freedom and liberation. One of the many books on the situation of women in Afghanistan was the story of a woman from the US who traveled to Kabul to teach hairdressing (Rodriguez and Ohlson 2007). This also became the subject of a documentary film, advertised with the endorsement 'Freedom is beautiful, but sometimes beauty is freedom, too'. A poster for the film bears the slogan, 'After decades of war and the Taliban, the women of Afghanistan need ... a makeover?' (Mermin, 2004; Beauty Academy of Kabul 2004; Internet Movie Database).

There is a chain of associations, from liberation, to the application of cosmetics, to dolls, and to the circulation of the image of woman as commodity. The market scenes also include shots of stallholders selling photographs of female movie stars from Bollywood cinema

(Stanmeyer 2001). The circulation of commodified images of women is presented as an index of liberation. This is also, of course, a challenge to taboos on visual representation under some interpretations of Islamic thought.

When the international news media invoked the trope of veiling and unveiling, they were drawing on a series of conventions which meant that the work of interpretation had already been done. A mere glimpse of the veiled woman invokes a ready-made narrative of middle-Eastern despotism, oppression of women, and a call to ‘save’ these women.<sup>4</sup> The cumulative effect of the media stories was to create a discursive field of statements about veiling and unveiling, a set of media representations which, in Butler’s terms, were ‘inextricably linked’ with ‘modes of military conduct’ (2009, p. 29). This contemporary discursive field has much in common with the colonial discourse of an earlier time, which is ‘maintained by a reiteration or citation of certain statements and representations’, which ‘guarantee its “factual” status, its “naturalness”, while simultaneously concealing the conventions upon which it is based’ (Yegenoglu 1998, p. 38).

### **An Icon of Mystery**

Steve McCurry is a freelance photographer who specializes in photographic essays for such publications as *National Geographic*. On an assignment in the mid-1980s, he photographed a young Afghan woman in a refugee camp in Pakistan. This was during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, before the break-up of the Soviet Union, and thus still framed by the worldview of the Cold War. The photograph came to take on iconic status, first appearing on the cover of *National Geographic* in June 1985, and then recycled in a range of other contexts.<sup>5</sup> It is undoubtedly a stunning image. It is perfectly composed; the green backdrop picks up the colour of the young woman’s eyes; and the reddish tones of her

clothes provide an exquisite contrast with the green elements of the picture. Most important, however, is the direct gaze of the young woman at the camera.<sup>6</sup>

On the front cover of *National Geographic* the photograph was captioned 'Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears'. The young woman does not speak, however, so any imputation of her feelings is undoubtedly a projection. The cover story mentions the school where the young woman is studying (Denker, 1985, p. 789), but there is no mention of the young woman on the cover as an individual. At this time, the name of the 'Afghan Girl' was unknown to the photographer and to most viewers of the photograph. Such photo-journalism does not provide stories of fully-present individuals, but rather creates a series of 'types'.<sup>7</sup>

Given the media's insatiable desire for scenes of veiling and unveiling in late 2001 and early 2002, it is unsurprising that the photograph of the 'Afghan Girl' would be revived. What is interesting, however, is the turn that this particular story then took. McCurry embarked on an expedition to find the nameless young woman that he had photographed in a refugee camp so many years before. The search for the 'Afghan Girl' then became the subject of countless news stories, a cover story in *National Geographic*, and a documentary film (Newman 2002). The dominant theme of the narrative of the 'Afghan Girl' is thus of mystery, with McCurry cast as the intrepid explorer and adventurer.

Seventeen years later, the 'Afghan Girl' was, of course, a mature woman. The young woman who had shown her face to the photographer now shielded her face behind the burqa, so that the photographer now had the privilege of staging her unveiling once again, and providing the images of this unveiling to the world's news media. The woman had always had a name, of course, but it was now for the first time known to the photographer, the readers of *National Geographic*, and the viewers of the documentary film. She was Sharbat

Gula, a married woman with three children, and had returned to Afghanistan three years before McCurry and his crew found her.

McCurry's quest reveals the 'deep structure' of the unveiling stories. There is a desire to take part in what might almost be called a 'primal scene' of unveiling. However, the desire can never be satisfied with any single enactment of the scene of unveiling, so that there is an obsessive return to, and repetition of, the scene of unveiling. On the cover of *National Geographic* of April 2002, the structure of this desire is revealed in a photograph where the 'Afghan Girl' appears simultaneously veiled and unveiled. The mature woman stands, her face and body covered by the burqa, but in her hands she holds the photograph of herself as a young woman, her piercing green eyes gazing directly at the viewer. The viewer has the pleasure of seeing the photograph of the young woman unveiled, but can fantasise about a further unveiling of the woman holding the photograph (*National Geographic*, 2002).<sup>8</sup>

McCurry's quest for the 'Afghan Girl' re-enacts the narratives of European exploration of the non-Western world, once again suggesting the metonymic relationship between woman, land and nation. It is appropriate that the search for the 'Afghan Girl' should be staged for *National Geographic*, the magazine which has for over a century participated in the exoticisation of the non-Western world and the valorisation of narratives of exploration, scientific research and anthropological fieldwork (Lutz and Collins, 1993). The story about Sharbat Gula also repeats some classic Orientalist clichés, such as the image of timelessness, of being outside history until the intervention of the European viewer. The *National Geographic* journalist tells us that '[s]he is 28, perhaps 29, or even 30. No one, not even she knows. Stories shift like sand in a place where no records exist' (Newman, 2002, unpaginated). McCurry expands on the theme of timelessness: 'When I saw the film, I was

surprised by how still and quiet it appeared. At that point the Soviets had been in Afghanistan for five years. So, it was a specific moment in time. Yet it was a timeless moment' (McCurry, 2002, unpaginated).

Scientists are called in to verify the truth of the claim that this really is the same woman who had been photographed by McCurry seventeen years before. They compare the irises of the young woman in the photograph and of the mature woman Sharbat Gula (Allen, 2002; 'The Eyes Have it', 2002).<sup>9</sup> The scientific investigations into the 'truth' of the features of the face of the Afghan Girl parallel the stories about the use of scientific technologies to probe the caves of Tora Bora, where the Al Qaeda operatives were then thought to be hiding out (Schmitt and Myers, 2001, p. 1; Revkin, 2001, p. 1; 'Caves of Afghanistan, 2001). Indeed, the documentary on the search for the 'Afghan Girl' explicitly references '9/11'. In the documentary film, scenes of Steve McCurry talking about his search for the 'Afghan Girl' are intercut with scenes of the strike on the World Trade Center towers. Both sets of stories – of the search for the 'Afghan Girl' and the search for Al Qaeda in the caves of Tora Bora – imply an opposition between the superior scientific technologies of the United States and its allies, and the 'underdevelopment' of people who hide out in caves. Strangely enough, Sharbat Gula now lived in the mountains near Tora Bora.

In the short promotional film for the documentary *In Search of the Afghan Girl*, the following sequence of shots can be seen: an aeroplane striking the World Trade Center, a street scene of people watching the strike, debris falling from the World Trade Center, a street scene from Afghanistan, a close up of McCurry talking, a street scene from Afghanistan, McCurry getting into a taxi, McCurry rushing up stairs, McCurry in an aeroplane on the way to Afghanistan. While McCurry's narration simply states that there was

a renewed interest in Afghanistan and the ‘Afghan girl’ after ‘9/11’, the sequence of images suggests a more direct relationship between the terrorist attacks and McCurry’s trip to Afghanistan. This sequence of images and narration is layered with a percussive score which imparts a feeling of urgency. The stillness and silence of the ‘girl’ in the photograph contrast with the loquacity and activity of the photographer (National Geographic, 2010). While there is no direct connection between the activities of a private media organisation and the US government and armed forces, the timing of this quest is extraordinary. McCurry’s access to Afghanistan was surely made possible by the invasion.<sup>10</sup> In the same way that each veiled/unveiled woman functions as a metonym for the subordinated nation of Afghanistan, the photographer-as-explorer functions as a metonym for the United States in its mission to control the land of Afghanistan. McCurry also provides a personification of skill, strength and control at a time of disavowal of national vulnerability and anxiety about masculinity in the wake of ‘9/11’ (cf. Butler 2009, p. 24).

### **An Icon of Pity**

In 2002, an autobiographical account of the life of a young woman under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was published by an international feminist publisher. The front and back cover of the paperback book are completely taken up with a photograph of a burqa, a woman’s eyes dimly visible through the mesh (Latifa, 2002). Images of veils in blue/purple shades, and the mesh which hides the faces of Afghan women, had by now become a convenient visual shorthand to indicate Afghan women, the oppressiveness of the former Taliban regime, and the nation of Afghanistan. The title of this memoir, *My Forbidden Face*, is one symptom of the obsessive attention paid to the covering and uncovering of women’s faces in accounts of the recent history of Afghanistan specifically, and more generally in

accounts of the lives of women under Islamic regimes.<sup>11</sup> There has also, of course, been feminist resistance to the deployment of such imagery; and Muslim women have affirmed their own agency with respect to the wearing of the veil (Ezekiel, 2005; Scott 2007; Dreher and Ho, 2007). Nevertheless, every contribution to this debate adds to the discursive field of statements about veiling and unveiling, and it is a rare publisher who can resist the temptation to use photographs of veils, screen or lattice, or who can resist using the words ‘veil’, ‘unveil’, ‘reveal’, ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’ in the titles of these books. A further set of metaphors concern silence and the voice, and in many cases a synaesthetic effect with the mixed metaphors of vision and voice.<sup>12</sup> There is also a relentless repetition of prepositions denoting movement into another space: ‘behind’, ‘beyond’, ‘through’, ‘inside’.<sup>13</sup>

The photograph of Bibi Aisha on the front cover of *Time Magazine* in August 2010 can thus be placed in the context of a series of photographs of Afghan women in the course of the recent war in Afghanistan. At the same time, this photograph draws on a longer history of Euro-American fascination with veiled and unveiled women. Where the earlier photographs examined here largely traded in feelings of desire, enchantment, mystery and intrigue, the photograph of Aisha is rather about horror. In describing the barbarity of the Taliban, however, this is still within the parameters of Orientalist discourse. The contrast between ‘their’ barbarity and ‘our’ civility is what constitutes the Middle East as other, and what constitutes the self of the Euro-American observer.<sup>14</sup> This is also what justifies invasion and intervention.

In the on-line edition of *Time* magazine, there is a short film clip narrated by Jodi Bieber, the photographer who took Aisha’s photograph. The film clip takes the form of a kind of unveiling. Bieber’s narrated voiceover in the soundtrack is layered with

middle eastern string music. Aisha has nothing to say. Her voice is not heard. We first see two shots of Aisha's face, the first showing only the top half of her face, the second showing half of her face as if bisected by a vertical line. Both of these shots are framed so that we can appreciate her beautiful eyes and hair, and do not yet see her disfigurement. In the next shot the camera shows Aisha seated on a divan, and we can now see her whole face. Unlike the earlier photographs discussed here, the effect of this unveiling is not erotic pleasure but horror. Bieber's narration also reveals the contradictory impulses at work. Although the photograph has clearly been displayed on the front cover in order to shock the readers of *Time* magazine, Bieber explains that she wanted to portray Aisha as being beautiful.

...For me it was more about capturing something about her, and that was a really – a difficult part. You know her headscarf fell slightly back and her hair was exposed and she had the most beautiful hair. And I said to her, 'you know you are really such a beautiful woman and I could never understand or know how you're feeling ... But what I can do is show you as beautiful in this photograph' (Bieber, 2010)

Bieber's emphasis on the importance of beauty is intended to provide Aisha with some dignity. Her comments also, however, form part of the abovementioned discursive field of statements about beauty in the last decade of war in Afghanistan (Rodriguez and Ohlson 2007; Mermin, 2004; Beauty Academy of Kabul 2004; Internet Movie Database, undated). The very real need for Aisha to undergo reconstructive surgery in the wake of her disfigurement, however, makes the abovementioned comments about freedom, beauty and 'makeovers' in promotions for *The Beauty School of Kabul* seem flippant and trivial.

While the photographs by Yannis Behrakis and Steve McCurry were presented in terms of on-the-spot photojournalism, with little explicit acknowledgment of possible staging or framing, the photograph of Aisha has been carefully staged and is presented through multiple framing devices. In his editorial on the decision to display Aisha's photograph, *Time* editor Richard Stengel explains that the photograph is meant to contribute to a debate about the US presence in Afghanistan (Stengel, 2010, p. 2). His editorial can be placed in the context of a longstanding philosophical debate about what has been called the 'politics of pity'. It can also be situated in the context of those who have discussed the use of photographs in political campaigns (Woolf 1977 [1938]; Sontag 1977; Sontag 2003; 2009: 63–100).

Several modes of address have been identified in the representation of suffering. The genre of political denunciation aims to stir up feelings of anger *vis-à-vis* the evil-doer who inflicted pain on the sufferer. The genre of philanthropy aims to activate feelings of tender-heartedness and actions to comfort the sufferer. The mode of sublimation prompts reflection on the conditions of human misery (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 81, Boltanski, 1999). Stengel's editorial in *Time* magazine is framed in terms of denunciation, similar to Laura Bush's speech in November 2001. The editor's claim that the magazine does not want to come down on either side of the debate on the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan seems disingenuous when read in conjunction with the other content of this edition.

... We do not run this story or show this image either in support of the U.S. war effort or in opposition to it. We do it to illuminate what is actually happening on the ground. As lawmakers and citizens begin to sort through the information about the war and make up their minds, our job is to provide context and perspective on one of the most difficult foreign policy issues of our time (Stengel, 2010, p. 2).

This editorial, however, does not stand alone. It needs to be read in conjunction with

the cover photograph and text, the cover story and photo-essays on women in Afghanistan, and the on-line tie-ins. The cover of the edition of *Time* which displays Aisha's photograph is unusually wordy, suggesting a need to shape the readers' understanding of the photograph.<sup>15</sup> Next to Aisha's face is the headline 'What happens if we leave Afghanistan'.<sup>16</sup> In smaller type is a brief description of what happened to her. The effect of the photograph is to invoke feelings of horror and indignation. The effect of the slogan 'what happens if we leave Afghanistan' is to suggest that 'we' should not leave Afghanistan. The readers of *Time* are being interpellated as US citizens (or possibly citizens of Allied countries) who have the right to comment on their government's foreign policy. However, *Time* magazine has a global circulation, and readers from countries not allied with the United States are unlikely to feel that they are being included in this 'we'.

Unlike Yannis Behrakis' photograph of the young woman in front of the bakery in November 2001, or Steve McCurry's photograph of Sharbat Gula in 2002, this photograph is explicitly being deployed to instigate debate on US foreign policy. However, this photograph also gains its meaning from its placement in a long series of Euro-American depictions of the veiled and unveiled woman, and its more proximate placement in almost a decade of depictions of the women of Afghanistan. Like the 'pictures of pity' invoked in Enlightenment discourse, this photograph first of all invokes tender feelings for Aisha, then anger at the perpetrators of her disfigurement, and then a call to action. This call to action is inextricably bound up with contemporaneous debates on US foreign policy. The relevant actions are both philanthropic – in arranging for Aisha to travel to the US for reconstructive surgery<sup>17</sup> – and vengeful – in connecting Aisha's situation with the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan. It is not the reader, however, who undertakes these actions. At most the reader

will be stimulated to contribute to the debate on the deployment of troops in Afghanistan. There is a series of mediated relationships here between spectator/reader, editor, photographer and sufferer, but in many ways this is really about the relationship between the governments of the US and Afghanistan, with Aisha deployed as a token in this exchange.

In October 2011, Aisha travelled to the USA to begin the long process of reconstructive surgery. Barbara Walters covered the story on ABC television news, and there was extensive coverage in the international print media. They showed the ‘Hollywood style’ prosthetic which restored her beauty. With fearful symmetry, Laura Bush provided an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* which was syndicated throughout the world (Bush 2010). Now described as ‘former first lady of the United States and an honorary adviser to the US-Afghan Women’s Council’, she reiterated her message from 2001, with further references to ‘freedom’. There was a further symmetry in the reappearance of discussions of beauty. Let me reiterate that I find the violence the young woman was subjected to abhorrent. I also commend the benevolence of those who looked after her, supported her and organised the reconstructive surgery. What I question are the ethics of the repeated display of her image in photographs and videos, most particularly on the *front cover* of a news magazine which appears in newsagents and news stands throughout the world. This benevolence could have been achieved quietly without this display. I also ask why it was this particular story which was deemed to be suitable to stimulate debate in the US and allied countries on the progress of the war in Afghanistan.

In terms of Judith Butler’s exploration of ‘precarious life’ and the ‘differential distribution of grievability across populations’ (Butler 2009, p. 24), it could perhaps be argued that Aisha has been positioned as a ‘grievable life’, for her name and face are now

known to us. Her youth and female gender also make her a more understandable and less threatening victim.<sup>18</sup> However, this is at the expense of constituting the other inhabitants of her country as barbaric and less than grievable. This is not to condone the actions of the Taliban, but to ask whether military intervention is the solution to such shocking incidents of gendered violence.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In this essay I have surveyed over a decade of visual representations of Afghan women, which have emanated from first world media organisations and have circulated in transnational media space. This discussion has mainly focused on three photographs, but they have been contextualised with a range of other photographs and texts. Only one of the photographs has been explicitly linked with a political discussion. However, all of the photographs surveyed here have contributed to a set of possible statements about veiling and unveiling. All of these representations position the first world viewer as active and articulate spectator and the third world woman as passive and silent sufferer. In this way, they contribute to the constitution of a set of power relations whereby the US and its allies have sovereignty and where it seems ‘natural’ that these sovereign nations can intervene in the affairs of another nation, in the name of ‘saving’ the women of that nation. In her book, *Frames of War*, Judith Butler focused on ‘cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence’ (2002, p. 1). As I have demonstrated above, both the photograph of Aisha, used as evidence of the barbarity of the Taliban, and the upbeat photographs of unveiling, used as evidence of the benevolence of the US occupiers, have been part of the constitution of a particular regime of representation, where media representations are inextricably linked with military conduct.

These concerns have been brought home to me all the more strongly in the context of recent news stories about visual representation in the context of the death of Osama Bin Laden. Over the last decade we have seen various choices about displaying photographs which are, in the words of *Time Magazine* last year, 'hard to look at' (Stengel 2010). The decision to display the photograph of the victim of the Taliban's violence can be contrasted with the reluctance on the part of some US news organisations to display the photographs of the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib and the recent decision not to show photographs of the dead Osama Bin Laden. As Butler explains, 'the affect of horror is differentially experienced' (2009, p. 49).

We can infer some of the factors which influence decisions about the use of photographs in the media. Who was the perpetrator? In simple terms, was it 'us' or 'them'? There has been a reluctance to display evidence of violent acts perpetrated by US soldiers, but more willingness to display evidence of the violent acts of 'our' enemies. Choices are also made about which victims' suffering can be displayed. Young women or children are generally judged to elicit more sympathy. There are also questions of consent. Has the victim consented to the display of her photograph? And is consent meaningful in the case of a poor third world woman confronted with a first world photographer backed by a powerful media organisation? We also need to ask about the ethics of display. Would *Time Magazine* have run a photograph of a disfigured American woman on the front cover, or would such a woman's privacy have been respected?

These questions need to be asked, not only in the case of depictions of violence, but with respect to all of the photographs under analysis here. Were all of the so-called 'Afghan Girls' in a position to provide full and informed consent to having their photographs taken,

and having their photographs displayed in the international news media? The very fact that Steve McCurry did not initially seek out the name of the ‘Afghan Girl’ in 1985 suggests that there had been no attempt to gain consent.

In a discursive and genealogical approach to the analysis of visual imagery, I have placed these three photographs of young Afghan women in the context of a broader representational field. Both upbeat photographs of unveiled young women and shocking photographs of violence are implicated in the formation of a particular regime of representation. We can best understand this representational regime by analysing a full set of texts and intertexts and tracking their implication in modes of military conduct.

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<sup>1</sup> The same photograph appears both inside and on the back cover of the Reuter's collection, *Afghanistan: Lifting the Veil*, and is used to illustrate Sullivan (2002, p. 10).

<sup>2</sup> For definitions of the fetish, fetishism, and fetishisation, see: Erwin (2002, pp. 414–416); Wright (1992, pp. 41–45, 113–120, 327–331). Mulvey (1984 [1975], pp. 361–373).

<sup>3</sup> A series of classic works bear titles which are variations on the theme of 'Unveiling' (Forster, 1829; Woodsmall, 1983[1936]; Fanon 1965[1957]; Mernissi 1975).

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Wolfe (2002, p. 380) has commented on the ‘historical purchase of the “white men saving brown women from brown men” sentence, which as the crocodile tears that fell with the bombs on the women of Afghanistan attest, captures a feature of transnational domination that continues into the present.’ Wolfe is referring to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1999, p. 287) use of the phrase ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ in her account of the debates over the practice of *sati* (the immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre) in colonial India.

<sup>5</sup> For other discussions of the Steve McCurry’s photographs of Sharbat Gula, see Mackie (2003, pp. 9–11), Szörényi (2004, pp. 2–12) Hesford and Kozol (2005, pp. 1–5). In this article I take a genealogical approach which covers a wider range of representations over a longer time span in the context of a broader representational regime which, I argue, is shaped by militarism.

<sup>6</sup> The staging of the photograph is not apparent in the final product which appears on the front page of *National Geographic*. However, a series of the original shots is reproduced in the documentary, *In Search of the Afghan Girl*. The other shots have different coloured backgrounds, suggesting that McCurry tried different backdrops (which appear to be the neutral-coloured wall of the schoolroom and then the green of the schoolroom door which provides such a stunning contrast to the young woman’s clothes, and which picks up the green of her eyes).

<sup>7</sup> The features of this genre are apparent in a collection of McCurry’s photographs, *Portraits* (1999). Each right-hand page of the volume takes the form of a photograph of one individual (occasionally more than one person: for example, a mother and child). The facing page simply provides the location and date of the photograph. Very few of the photographs are of identifiable individuals. The photograph of the still-anonymous ‘Afghan Girl’ appears on the cover of the collection. I was able to identify Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, and actor Jimmy Stewart, but their photographs were simply captioned as ‘Rangoon, Burma, 1995’, ‘Dharmasala, India, 1997’ and ‘Los Angeles, USA, 1991’, (McCurry, 1999, unpaginated).

<sup>8</sup> See also the cover of the book *Unveiled: Voices of Women in Afghanistan* (Logan 2002), where the different coloured type used for the elements ‘un’ and ‘veiled’ in the first word of the title means that the word seems to simultaneously say ‘veiled’ and ‘unveiled’.

<sup>9</sup> On the theme of technology in this quest, see also: Mackie (2003, p. 11) and Szörényi (2004, pp. 8–10).

<sup>10</sup> By the time of the Iraq conflict, the management of the media by the US government and military through the practices of embedding, and through prohibitions on depictions of dead (US) soldiers was the subject of controversy (Butler 2009: 63–100).

<sup>11</sup> Among the many recent books which deploy this trope, see: Yasgur (2002); Logan (2002); Rasool (2002), Goodwin (2002 [1995]); Reuters (2002). See also countless newspaper and magazine articles,

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including: Waldman (2001, p. 3); Sullivan (2002, p. 10). There was also an earlier wave of books about the oppressiveness of Islamic regimes, some of which were reissued in the wake of the events of 2001–2. The recent wave of books about Afghanistan revives some of the conventional themes of these books. Geraldine Brooks' (1995) book about Islamic women – *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* – manages to avoid mentioning the veil in the title, but the use of the word 'hidden' still suggests a secret to be uncovered.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Logan (2002) *Unveiled: Voices of Women in Afghanistan*; Goodwin (2002 [1995]) *Price of Honor: Muslim women Lift the Veil of Silence on The Islamic World; Voices behind the Veil*; Rasool (2002) *My Journey Behind the Veil: Conversations with Muslim Women*.

<sup>13</sup> See, inter alia, Benard (2002) *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance*; 'Beneath the Veil: Inside the Taliban's Afghanistan' (2001); Mernissi (1975) *Beyond the Veil*; Rasool (2002) *My Journey Behind the Veil: Conversations with Muslim Women*; Rodriguez and Ohlson (2007) *Kabul Beauty School: An American Woman Goes behind the Veil*; Yasgur (2002) *Behind the Burqa: Our Life in Afghanistan and How We Escaped to Freedom*.

<sup>14</sup> Orientalist paintings focused on extreme punishments such as beheadings, or the extreme violence of Sardanapalus, who had the women of his harem murdered and his possessions destroyed so that his victor in battle would not have access to them. See Kabbani (1986).

<sup>15</sup> The cover on the occasion of Bin Laden's death has a photograph of Bin Laden's face, superimposed with a red cross, and above the *Time* masthead, the words 'Special Report: The End of Bin Laden' (*Time*, 20 May 2011). The edition on the wedding of Kate Middleton and Prince William has a medium shot of the couple kissing, with the words 'The Royal Wedding April 29 2011' in small print, and the words 'Special Commemorative Issue' above the *Time* masthead (*Time*, 16 May 2011). Aisha's photograph, by comparison, is supported with a total of 30 words: 'What happens if we leave Afghanistan by Aryn Baker', and a further 21 words in smaller type describing what happened to her. Above the masthead are the words 'Inside: Joe Klein on the challenge in Pakistan'.

<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, the headline is somewhat illogical, for the US troops stationed in Afghanistan for almost nine years had been unable to protect Aisha. As one commentator noted, 'A correct and accurate caption would be "What Is Still Happening, Even Though We Are in Afghanistan"' (ScoCCA. 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Aisha can also, then, be connected with a series of women who have travelled to North America and have received cosmetic surgery. One such would be Kim Phuc, the young woman photographed running away from a napalm attack during the Vietnam War (Chong, 2000). Others would be the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, who traveled to the US for cosmetic surgery to disguise their disfigurement due to the bombing (Barker 1986). In all of these stories, the US is recast as benefactor rather than aggressor (despite the fact that both Kim Phuc and the 'Hiroshima Maidens' had suffered

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disfigurement due to US military attacks). Like the story of the search for Sharbat Gula, these stories underline the technical superiority of the US.

<sup>18</sup> In this, it is similar to the photograph of Kim Phuc, the young girl photographed running away from the napalm attack during the Vietnam War.

<sup>19</sup> As Butler paraphrases Adorno: ‘And here we have to see – as Adorno cautioned us – that violence in the name of civilization reveals its own barbarism, even as it “justifies” its own violence by presuming the barbaric subhumanity of the other against which that violence is waged’ (Butler, 2009, pp. 93; Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Adorno 2005).