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War Without Death: Responses to Distant Suffering

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Contemporary media representations of warfare are marked by a glaring paradox: whilst modern media technology has the potential to permit us to see more details of warfare than ever before, and whilst fictional representations of warfare, and of violent acts in general, have become ever bloodier and more explicit, non-fictional ones (at least in the British and US mainstream media) have become increasingly restrained and sanitised.

Never was this more apparent than in the 1990/1 Gulf War in which, due to a combination of rigid media management by the military and the fact that much of the action was waged from the air, the representation of the war was reduced to the level of a video game, with 'clean' images from 'smart' weapons complementing the emptying of language of any connotations of human suffering - hence 'surgical strikes', 'collateral damage', 'soft targets' and all the other euphemisms for death and destruction which the media armchair generals were only too happy to parrot from the modern military vocabulary. This conception of war as something acted out by machines as opposed to sentient human beings was perfectly encapsulated by President Bush's National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft stating that: 'our goal was not to kill people. Our goal was to destroy the Iraqi army' (Taylor, 1998:179). No wonder, then, that those sections of the British press which were perfectly content to play their allotted role in this process, which John Taylor has described as "de-realisation" and Paul Virilio as "the aesthetics of disappearance", reacted with such fury when the BBC and ITN showed even highly sanitised images of the consequences of the allied bombing of the Amiriya bunker in Baghdad, which we now know killed over 1600 people, mostly women and children. As Phillip Knightley explained:

> '…one reason for this almost hysterical reaction was that the reporting of the Amiriya bombing threatened the most important element in the military's propaganda strategy - an attempt to change public perception of the nature of war itself, to convince everyone that new technology has removed a lot of war's horrors ... The picture that was painted was of a war almost without death.' (Knightley, 2000:494-95).

As Hugh Gusterson put it, the media coverage of the Gulf War demonstrated: 'the power of a system of representations which marginalises the presence of the body in war, fetishises machines, and personalises international conflicts while depersonalising the people who die in them' (Gusterson, 1991:51). And indeed, it might have been thought at the time that the way in which the media covered the Gulf War would set the pattern for the coverage of future wars as well.

The Right Perspective

However, such a prediction would have been proved wrong, at least to some extent, by media coverage of the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. That this coverage was significantly different can be attributed to at least three factors. Firstly, the nature of the action itself, in which soldiers on the ground played a far greater role than in the Gulf War. Secondly, the relatively easy availability of alternative media, many of which represented the invasion from a very different perspective from that of the mainstream media – in other words, one which regarded the action as illegal. Chief amongst these was al-Jazeera, but almost as important were the numerous websites which carried highly critical coverage of the invasion. And thirdly, in Britain at least, the press was far more divided than in the Gulf War, with the *Independent*, *Mirror* and much of the *Guardian* strongly opposed to the Anglo-American adventure.

It was these last two factors which allowed British people to see images of death and injury from Iraq which the mainstream broadcasters (along with most of the press) refused to show them – at least whilst the invasion was in progress. And so, for the first time, the hitherto undisputed hegemony in this country of highly Anglo-centric notions of taste and decency in war coverage was thrown into sharp relief. Apart from reminding ourselves of Susan Sontag's remark about 'good taste' always being 'a repressive standard when invoked by institutions' (Sontag, 2003:61) and as 'obscuring a host of concerns about public order and public morale that cannot be named' (Sontag, 2003:62), it's also worth recalling, in this context, a revealing anecdote told by John Simpson about the aftermath of a mortar bomb landing in a Sarajevo street:

> '…a camera crew from the agency 'pool', whose pictures could be used by everyone, arrived first and saw the immediate results of the massacre. It was instructive to see how the reporters from different countries, and different television traditions, dealt with the pictures. The Italians used almost all of them: the brains, the intestines, the gutter literally running with blood in the rain. The French used the gutter and the bodies. The Americans used the gutter. We used none of these things: just the covered bodies being put into the ambulances, the empty pram, the abandoned shoes.' (Simpson, 1993:104).

Newspapers are, of course, 'free' to report and comment on matters in any way that they choose – or indeed to ignore them altogether – but broadcasters have a statutory obligation to inform their audiences impartially of the facts. But they have other obligations too, and some of these undoubtedly complicate their informational role.

Thus, for example, the BBC's *Producers' Guidelines* argue that:

> '…there is a balance to be struck between the demands of truth and the danger of desensitising people. With some news stories a sense of shock is part of a full understanding of what has happened. But the more often viewers are shocked, the more it will take to shock them.'

They also state that: 'the dead should be treated with respect and not shown unless there are compelling reasons for doing so. Close-ups should generally be avoided. When such scenes are justified they must not be lingered over'. Furthermore, flatly contradicting the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words, they maintain that: 'editing out the bloodiest scenes need not result in a sanitised version of events. A good script is vital in conveying the reality of tragedy' (BBC, 1996:75).

The Broadcasting Standards Commission's *Codes of Guidance*, which apply to all the terrestrial channels and also to BSkyB, contain almost identical provisions but also add that:

> '…images shown on television can have an overwhelming impact. While broadcasters should not shy away from showing the consequences of violence, they must also take care in the choice of accompanying words to ensure that they put the scenes into the right perspective and ensure that those exercising editorial judgements are aware of the impact such material may have on the audience.' (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1998:31)

Leaving aside thoughts about just what constitutes the 'right perspective', especially in time of war, it needs to be borne in mind that the policies of the mainstream broadcasters and their regulators on what it is proper to show are not developed in a vacuum, and have to take into account the views of the audience, the government, pressure groups, and, of course, the press. And many of these, for varied reasons, are hostile to the showing in news and current affairs programmes of violent images of any military action in which the UK is directly involved. Furthermore, we also have to bear in mind that in an increasingly competitive broadcasting environment, in which news provision plays a key commercial role, TV executives may well be concerned that factual images of death and injury are, quite literally, a turn-off.

In explaining why the BBC was unwilling to show explicit images of death and injury during the invasion, BBC Director of News Richard Sambrook stressed the views of the audience, arguing that:

> "…the fundamental question is what people will tolerate, and that shifts over time. Shocking people is an issue. You have to take care, certainly during daytime, but you can put stronger images on *Newsnight* than the

> *One O'clock News*; stronger on current affairs than on news." (Media Guardian, 31 March, 2003:7)

Noting that al-Jazeera showed far more disturbing scenes than did British broadcasters, he commented that: '… the Arab world is used to seeing more gory shots'. However, this is simply to ignore the fact that most European public service broadcasters, too, are *far* less squeamish than British ones. It's also hard not to detect a note of cultural condescension in Sambrook's remark; after all, if Arab viewers are indeed used to more gory shots than their British counterparts, maybe it's because many of them inhabit countries torn apart by brutal conflicts - conflicts in which the West is highly complicit. Equally Anglo-centric is Sambrook's admission that:

> "…there will be images of British and Iraqis that we wouldn't show under any circumstances, but once you get past that point you have to be more sensitive with UK casualties – it is more difficult to show dead UK soldiers than dead Iraqis. Nonetheless, that is secondary to the issue of taste." (ibid)

Nick Pollard of Sky News, however, took issue with this remark, one which all too clearly points up the accuracy of Sontag's observation that: 'the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying' (Sontag, 2003:63). Instead Pollard argued that:

> 'I wouldn't say that we wouldn't ever show pictures of UK casualties either dead or wounded. We've shown pictures of dead civilians in Basra and Baghdad. And it's absolutely illogical to say that it's fine to show dead Iraqis, civilians or soldiers, by the dozen, but not dead coalition soldiers. Although you do have to be careful with shots where you can recognise individual soldiers, we should show what's going on to the people of the countries who are waging the war … We shouldn't show only the process, we should show the effects as well. Bodies and injuries are part of it.' (ibid)

In particular, he raised the all-important point that broadcasting regulations dealing with taste and decency, and in particular with the portrayal of violence in general, should not be applied to the representation of violence in wartime, stating that: 'I'm not sure they are quite appropriate to the situation we're in now – we might want to show more than we would normally show under the regulations' (ibid).

Meanwhile, much to the fury of the government and the jingo press, al-Jazeera regularly showed uncensored pictures of the Iraqi victims of the invasion. It also showed pictures of mutilated bodies of British soldiers, and shots of US prisoners of war. The latter was condemned by Geoff Hoon as "a flagrant and sickening breach of the Geneva convention", even though he must have known that the Convention does not apply to the media, only to states or 'detaining powers'. Many of the war cheerleaders in the press were quick to agree with him, but, of course, this did not stop their papers from showing pictures of Iraqi prisoners of war, just as earlier they'd been quite happy to show pictures of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay - whose rights under the Geneva Convention are indeed being denied and violated on a daily basis.

The Viewers' Views

Given, then, that the limits of public taste and tolerance are frequently cited as the main reason for what is, in fact, self-censorship by the broadcasters, what *does* the public think about the reporting of military action in which this country is involved? Interestingly, there is very little recent research on this topic.

The most detailed evidence is to be found in David Morrison's *Television and the Gulf War*. Morrison's findings are quite complex, but it is undeniable that few of those interviewed for this project thought that television coverage of war should include close-ups of the dead or seriously injured. In the case of a battle involving Iraqi casualties 42% thought the scene should be shown only from a distance, so that the dead were not recognisable, whilst 43% thought it should be shown only after the dead and seriously injured had been removed. In the case of a battle involving British casualties the figures were 48% and 34% respectively. Scoring highly amongst the reasons why some of the interviewees thought that various disturbing scenes should not be shown *at all* were: 'upsetting for relatives of victims/prisoners' (with British relatives coming in for rather more consideration than Iraqi ones); 'upsetting for adults'; 'don't need to see it/can imagine it'; and 'children will get upset' (Morrison, 1992)

According to Morrison, his findings demonstrate that the majority of those who felt that certain images, such as those of the Amiriya bunker or the slaughter on the Basra Road, should not be shown at all:

> '…considered that they had enough imagination to grasp what had taken place without the need for detailed visual representation. It is not, therefore, that they did not wish to know about what went on in the war, but rather that they disagreed about what it was necessary to screen to establish that fact.' (Morrison, 1992:30)

The majority of his interviewees felt that:

> '…because the story carried by the news is one of war, does not mean that graphic scenes of death or injury have an automatic place in the news or "right" to be included…Its function was seen to be that of relaying what was happening in the war and in relaying what was happening it was not considered necessary for the news to include close-up shots of injury, but merely establish that injury had occurred.' (Morrison, 1992:38)

He concludes that: 'very few people really wish for the full horror of war to be shown on their screens.' (ibid:33)

During the week beginning 7 April 2003, which was the week in which Baghdad fell, the Independent Television Commission (ITC) polled over 4000 viewers in order to discover their views on various aspects of television coverage of the war. These included their views on ‘the use of graphic war images’, by which the ITC meant ‘images of dead people and/or pictures of prisoners of war.’

Just over half (55%) of the respondents felt that once such images had aired on foreign news channels which are available in the UK, then it was ‘only fair’ that they should be available on domestic channels too. 22% disagreed with this view, with the same percentage neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The ITC research also showed that:

> ‘…a majority (63%) felt that the feelings of the families involved should be paramount and that if coverage was likely to upset them, then the images should not be broadcast. Just over one in five (21%) were unclear of their view and 15% disagreed. Thirty-seven per cent agreed that they should never have been broadcast, but an almost identical number (38%) disagreed, and a quarter were unsure. These opinions have to be mediated alongside the viewpoint of a 57% majority that it was legitimate news and with appropriate warnings should therefore have been broadcast. Just over a quarter disagreed (26%).’ (Sancho and Glover, 2003:35)

Given that the ITC researchers’ questions were different from those of David Morrison, it’s difficult to compare the two studies in order to analyse whether attitudes towards televised images of death and imagery in wartime have changed since the first Gulf war. However, it could perhaps be argued that the greater availability of foreign stations, and especially of al-Jazeera, has made a small majority of viewers more tolerant of the broadcasting of such images on domestic channels.

Cynical Exploitation

In times of war, then, it’s not altogether surprising that broadcasters feel that they have to take into account what still appears to be many viewers’ preference for visual restraint and understatement. In addition, the BBC knows that its numerous enemies in the press are simply itching for any opportunity to decry it as ‘unpatriotic’.

Chief amongst these, of course, are the papers owned by rival broadcaster Rupert Murdoch. Having been given by No.10 everything that he could possibly want in the Communications Bill then passing through Parliament, he then, in archetypal Murdoch fashion, returned the favour in spades. Not only did his papers slavishly support the Bush/Blair line over Iraq, but equally importantly, they excoriated any form of journalism which dared to deviate from that line. He thus had both commercial and political reasons to attack the BBC, and lost no time in ratcheting up his permanent campaign against the Corporation via the *Sun*’s high-profile, week-long attack on it for showing a documentary about al-Jazeera in its *Correspondent* slot on BBC2 on Sunday June 1.

What the *Sun* opportunistically latched onto was the extremely brief, and heavily pixellated, footage of the dead bodies of Staff Sergeant Simon Cullingworth and Sapper Luke Allsopp, who were killed in an ambush during the war, footage which the BBC, along with the other UK broadcasters and the press, had refused to show at the time of its original release. The programme had in fact already been postponed for a month because the original screening would have coincided with the soldiers' funerals. The *Sun* referred to the footage variously as an 'atrocity', 'sickening' and 'beyond comprehension', although in fact the only thing that was truly sickening about this episode was the *Sun*'s entirely cynical exploitation of the grief of the dead men's relatives for its proprietor's commercial ends. Thus, for example, a lengthy article on May 28, headed 'Bloated, Biased and Disloyal to Britain', rapidly forgot the unfortunate relatives and launched into the main point of the story: a furious tirade against the BBC. Amongst other things this alleged that: 'senior officers aboard Britain's Gulf flagship Ark Royal banned BBC News 24 and switched to Sky News after sailors labelled the BBC the Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation' and quoted 'TV arts pundit' (and sometime Murdoch employee) Jonathan Miller to the effect that: "what Britain needs is a public broadcasting system that answers to viewers, not a bloated BBC hooked on extracting money with menaces from every home in the land".

Courageously, the BBC held its ground, and the programme was broadcast intact, although sadly, if all too predictably, not before Tony Blair and Geoff Hoon had given ample credence to the *Sun*'s squalid and self-interested campaign. There can be few clearer illustrations of two of the main sources of pressure on broadcasters to censor themselves, and few more chilling demonstrations of the consequences for journalism of the extraordinarily unhealthy relationship of mutual interdependence in which the Blair government and the Murdoch media are now locked. Interestingly, the ITC research cited above actually asked respondents whether they thought that the press outcry over scenes featuring allied prisoners and/or fatal casualties was in itself biased, and whether certain newspapers had made a judgement on the viewers' behalf that displaying prisoners on television was offensive. 45% agreed, 20% disagreed, and 35% neither agreed nor disagreed (ibid: 36).

Unfortunately for *Correspondent*, however, the BBC Governors' Programme Complaints Committee chose not to defend it when considering a complaint from the sister of Sapper Allsopp and the wife of Staff Sergeant Cullingworth, both of whom had written to the BBC prior to the transmission of the programme in order to ask for the removal of the footage of their dead relatives. Appearing before the Committee, Jana Bennett (Director of Television) argued that the *Correspondent* programme had tried to illustrate the way in which al-Jazeera's coverage of the war had differed from that of UK broadcasters. Part of the difference lay in its willingness to broadcast graphic images, and the problem for the BBC lay in trying to convey a proper understanding of this difference whilst at the same time not giving offence. Mark Damazer (Deputy Director of BBC News) pointed out that al-Jazeera's original coverage of the deaths of the two soldiers had been a matter of considerable controversy, and that to have omitted to show any of it would have undermined the credibility of the programme, whilst Bennett argued that it would have denied viewers a proper understanding of the subject. She also pointed out that by the time the programme used the images they were already firmly in the public domain, that the bodies shown were not civilians but soldiers, who may be expected to be casualties of war, and that al-Jazeera's original broadcast footage had been considerably truncated and pixellated before being shown on *Correspondent*. She concluded that the public interest in showing the footage was sufficiently compelling to override the opposition of the relatives, and that the images had been an essential part of the story about al-Jazeera's growing influence.

However, in its wisdom the Committee decided that:

> '…the programme could have given an effective account of the nature of Al-Jazeera's journalism without the use of the pictures, particularly given the opposition of the families, and that the inclusion of the footage showing the bodies of the British soldiers had not been essential to a proper understanding of the subject of the programme. The Committee therefore took the view that, on balance, the public interest argument had not been sufficiently compelling and the complaints from Ms Allsopp and Mrs Cullingworth were upheld.'[1]

The Committee was keen to assuage BBC Management's concern that upholding the relatives' complaint would create a precedent in relation to the use of distressing footage in future programmes, thus pointing out that decisions on matters such as this could be made only on a 'case-by-case basis against the requirements of the BBC Producers' Guidelines, including consideration of the public interest' (BBC, 1996). However, their judgement can surely serve only to encourage over-caution and self-censorship in this area in future, just as the BBC Governors' banning of *Real Lives: Edge of the Union* (another victim, incidentally, of a smear campaign by a Murdoch newspaper, on this occasion *The Sunday Times*) discouraged many in the BBC from tackling the Northern Ireland issue in the late 1980s.[2]

Moral sleep and historical amnesia

That the broadcasters do censor themselves in times of war (as indeed at other times) is, as we have seen, undeniable, and we have explored – although not endorsed – some of the reasons why they do so. Of course, no-one would argue that the most horrific images should be shown at primetime – even with due warning. But ever since the Gulf War there has been growing criticism of the degree to which broadcasters are shielding viewers from the true horrors of wars in which their own country is involved. Thus, for example, Martin Bell has argued that:

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[1] *Finding by the Governors' Programme Complaints Committee* - Correspondent: Al-Jazeera Exclusive, BBC Two, Sunday 1st June 2003. Complaints by Ms N. Allsopp and Mrs A. Cullingworth http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/programmecomplaints/pdf/pcu_correspondent.pdf.

[2] Ibid

> '…people have to be left with some sense of what happened, if only through the inclusion of pictures sufficiently powerful at least to hint at the horror of those excluded. To do otherwise is to present war as a relatively cost-free enterprise and an acceptable way of settling differences, a one-sided game that soldiers play in which they are seen shooting but never suffering. The camera shows the outgoing ordinance, but seldom the incoming.' (Bell, 1997:15)

He concluded that:

> '…we have retreated too far, certainly, in British television ...We should flinch less. We should sometimes be willing to shock and to disturb. We should show the world more nearly as we find it, without the anaesthetic of a good taste censorship.' (ibid)

The way in which such censorship operated during the invasion of Iraq was all too clearly illustrated in *The True Face of War* (June 5, 2003), the third episode of the C4 series *The War We Never Saw*. This showed clearly that there were significant civilian casualties during the American advance on Baghdad, and that these, exactly like those slaughtered on the Basra Road in the Gulf War, were inadequately covered by British broadcasters. A particularly telling moment occurs when Stuart Webb of ITN describes filming a civilian vehicle in which three people had been blown apart and incinerated:

> "…as I panned along one body I hurried my pan because I realised I couldn't use it anyway, and I stood there for about five minutes just looking for one image to shoot that could be acceptable on British TV, and the only thing I could use was the hand of one of the victims."

This is particularly chilling, as it suggests that British television journalists may actually be tempted to censor the raw material of historical record, simply because they see little point in filming images which they know cannot be shown on British television.

In the event, Webb's pan, and much other equally horrifying footage, was indeed shown in this exemplary programme. Similarly, on 14 February 2003, the *Guardian* devoted the whole of its *G2* section to a series of appalling images from the Gulf War all bar one of which had never before appeared in the mainstream British press. But nowhere in these assaults on what John Taylor has aptly described as 'the moral sleep and historical amnesia that can exist when such imagery goes unseen or unreproduced' (Taylor, 1998:6) is it ever adequately explained why it was felt that these images could not be shown in Britain at the time of the events portrayed in them. Could such admirable interventions actually be a sad confirmation of Taylor's proposition that: 'terrible images and accounts belong to war's peripheral history' ((Taylor, 1998:183) as opposed to its contemporaneous representation?

In our name

During the invasion itself, the *Guardian* ran an editorial which asked:

> '…how much should we – the passive viewers, readers and consumers of war – be shielded from or exposed to, the full horrors of what is going on? Our parliament voted for this. To that extent, if no further, the death and pain is in our name. Many of the weapons which cause the daily carnage in Iraq are loaded in, and despatched from, the middle of the gentle Gloucestershire countryside. Can we reasonably turn our eyes away from what happens when they reach their hot and dusty destination six hours later?' (*Guardian*, 28 March 2003)

To which one might add: there is all the difference in the world between, on the one hand, choosing to turn one's eyes away from images that one does not want to see, and, on the other, being denied the ability to make that decision by the prior censorship of those images. As Kevin Williams has forcefully put it:

> '…wars prosecuted by democratic societies are done so in the name of the people. If the public supports a war then it has a responsibility for the consequences. Citizens have rights and responsibilities, and surely one of the responsibilities in wartime is to see - or at least to be provided with the opportunity to see - the price being paid to prosecute the war, whether this is the body of your neighbour's son or innocent civilians killed in the crossfire. Even if people do not want to accept their responsibilities it is difficult to argue that they have a right to be protected from seeing what happens on the battlefield. This would appear to deny a necessary democratic impulse.' (Williams 1992:161)

Of course, just as those presented with the opportunity to see disturbing images may reject it, so those who choose to look at those images may choose to read them in a variety of ways. As Susan Sontag has put it:

> '…there are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding – at a distance, through the medium of photography – other people's pain. Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.' (Sontag, 2003:11-12)

Inevitably, how people react to such images will depend largely on how they understand the situation from which the images come. But how they understand that situation will, in turn, have been shaped, although not, of course, wholly formed, by the media's prior representation (if any) of it, in particular, by the context and frames of reference within which it has been represented.

Certainly, though, we cannot simply assume that mere exposure to horrific pictures from a war which some consider illegal and immoral will necessarily lead those viewing them to condemn that war, let alone to condemn war in general. Thus David Morrison's interviewees, even when confronted by imagery of the Amiriya bunker and the Basra Road, were buttressed

> '…by their acceptance of the war as both just, and given the perceived intransigence of Saddam Hussein, inevitable. Basically, blame for all the suffering was placed at Saddam Hussein's door, and this fact mediated the impact of the images seen.' (Morrison, 1992:38)

Alternatively, those faced with disturbing images of distant suffering may react with mere indifference. This sometimes leads to the claim that people have become 'desensitised' by such images, or that they have brought about that telling post-Thatcherite condition known as 'compassion fatigue'. However, there is no more evidence that watching certain kinds of images 'makes' people indifferent than that watching other kinds of images 'makes' them violent. On the other hand, there certainly is evidence that large numbers of viewers fail to understand why the scenes of death and destruction which they are witnessing are happening in the first place (Philo *et al.*, 2003).

Thus if images of suffering not only fail to spur people to indignation and action but actually produce only indifference in them, then the fault may well lie not with the images themselves but in the manner in which these images are presented, not to mention in the fact that they are being viewed in a society in which personal selfishness and national insularity have been elevated into cardinal virtues. As Stanley Cohen argues: 'responses to distant suffering will depend on how its component images are presented' (Cohen, 2001:176), and although modern media technologies can beam images of live horrors around the world in minutes, they cannot on their own make them comprehensible. This requires the addition of context, without which viewers are all too liable to become confused or indifferent, or, worse still, impatient or even hostile. As Cohen puts it:

> '… if the media present a country's violence as just another episode in a centuries-long Darwinian struggle for power, a twist in an endless cycle of retaliation which is beyond any imaginable solution, then bystander 'passivity' is hardly surprising.' (Cohen, 2001:177).

In such a situation, shoulder-shrugging all too quickly shades off into moral disgust, particularly in a country such as the UK, with its long colonial history and its enthusiasm for neo-liberal ideology. As Cohen concludes, such responses

> '…have little to do with fatigue or the sheer repetition of images. The reason is that any dimming of compassion, any decreased concern about distant others, is just what the individual spirit of the global market wants to encourage. The message is: get real, wise up and toughen up; the lesson is that nothing, nothing after all, can be done about problems like these or people like this.' (Cohen, 2001:195)

Ignorance and superficiality

At this point, we perhaps need to remind ourselves of Susan Sontag's remark to the effect that:

> '…a photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude … Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one – and can help build a nascent one.' (Sontag, 1973:17)

Thus, even if British television had shown appalling pictures of, say, the consequences of the American bombing of the two Baghdad markets, which massacred at least 76 civilians, it would probably have made little difference to many people's attitude to the event, and to the invasion as a whole, if it had been presented in both a media and wider political context riddled with equivocation and evasion about where the true blame for the atrocity, and for the war as a whole, lay. As Sontag concludes: 'what determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness' (Sontag, 1973: 19), one to which, frankly, it is quite inconceivable that any British broadcaster could have given expression or succour during the war, even had it wished to do so. In the event, the manner in which these appalling incidents were represented in the mainstream news programmes simply made them seem like entirely different ones from those described so powerfully by an eyewitness such as Robert Fisk in the *Independent.*

Nonetheless, even though British broadcasters are highly unlikely to change the ideological frameworks within which they report wars in which Britain is involved, is it too much to hope that the reporting of death and injury in wartime might be freed from the shackles of the 'taste and decency' regulations, whose application to war reporting is surely quite inappropriate? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that, in their attitudes to images of death and injury in military actions undertaken by this country, both the regulators of British broadcasting and large sections of the audience on whose behalf they allegedly regulate simply need – to put it bluntly – to grow up and get real. Wars involve bloodshed and slaughter, and those involved in them, even indirectly, have a moral and political responsibility to face this simple fact. They can, of course, choose not to do so, but the broadcast media should not help them to bury their heads in the sand. Furthermore, if people choose to join armed forces then they knowingly put themselves in a position of risk, and, in the modern media-saturated world, they and their relatives simply have to accept the fact that images which they might prefer were kept private may be beamed around the globe: after all, banning them from British television hardly banishes them from the screens of other, less squeamish and complicit, nations. And as for civilians – the reactions of those in the scenes of carnage finally shown in *The True Face of War* made it abundantly clear that they actively *wanted* the inhabitants of the aggressor nations to be made to face the human consequences of their governments' actions. For these reasons, then, it's extremely hard to disagree with Susan Sontag when she argues that:

> '…no one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.' (Sontag 2003:102).

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