

The Maywand District Murders: Violence, Vulnerability and Desecrating the Body

Written by Thomas Gregory

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THOMAS GREGORY, MAR 8 2016

On January 15, 2010, a convoy of armoured troop carriers descended on the remote village of La Mohammad Kalay in the Afghan province of Kandahar (Boal 2011). Rumours indicated that Taliban insurgents were hiding in a maze of tunnels around the village and a group of soldiers from Forward Operating Base Ramrod had been sent to investigate. It soon became apparent though that these rumours were false. There was no sign of any insurgents, only the depressingly familiar sight of “destitute Afghan farmers living without electricity or running water; bearded men with poor teeth in tattered traditional clothes; young kids eager for candy and money” (Boal, 2011). But the absence of any insurgent activity did not prevent members of the squadron from implementing a plan they had hatched back on base. As officers spoke to village elders, two soldiers – Specialist Jeremy Morlock and Private Andrew Holmes – went off to search for “someone to kill” (Ashton 2010). They encountered a 15-year-old boy called Gul Mudin on the outskirts of the village tending to his father’s crops and shouted at him in broken Pashto, demanding that he stand perfectly still. Although he was clearly unarmed, they tossed a grenade in his direction but their intention was not to kill him with the explosive, merely to make it look like they were under attack. As soon as the grenade exploded, the two soldiers opened fire, killing the young the boy.

But the violence did not stop there. After stripping him naked and searching his body for any identifying marks, members of the platoon took turns to pose for photographs with Mudin’s corpse, holding his head aloft as if he were a prize stag killed on a trophy hunt. After they had taken their pictures, Staff Sergeant Gibbs took a pair of medical shears from his pack, removed a finger from the boy’s hand and placed it in a zip-lock bag, which he presented to Holmes as a souvenir of his first “combat kill”. This incident was the first in a series of attacks by members of the notorious Afghan Kill Team, which culminated in the deaths of at least three unarmed civilians and the eventual imprisonment of seven American soldiers. The legal and moral ramifications of these attacks have already been addressed but what is really interesting about this case is the excessive and particularly brutal nature of the violence inflicted on the bodies of those targeted. The destruction and dismemberment of the body *post mortem* seems to confound the instrumentalist account of war, which assumes that violence is inflicted to achieve a specific set of goals.

The gruesome and superfluous nature of these attacks raises a number of important questions about contemporary practices of violence: How do we make sense of a violence that is no longer concerned with matters of life and death but only seeks to destroy the human body? What does this excess of violence tell us about the underlying racial assumptions that render certain populations so profoundly killable and their bodies so intensely injurable or woundable? In what ways might the destruction of the human body be complicit in the dehumanisation of the victim? The trouble is our existing conceptual frames do not seem well-equipped to grapple with these concerns, so this article will look to the work of Adriana Cavarero for assistance. What follows below builds on a series of ideas introduced in my article “Dismembering the Dead: Violence, Vulnerability and the Body in War”, which was recently published by the *European Journal of International Relations* (Gregory, forthcoming).

The Horror! The Horror!

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has been strangely silent about the bodies – both human and nonhuman – that inhabit its worlds and the violence that is often inflicted upon them. Carol Cohn’s ethnography of defence intellectuals during the Cold War, for example, notes that many spoke in a very clean and sanitised manner when it came to killing, which allowed them to discuss the destruction of entire cities without any sense of

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“horror, urgency or moral outrage” (Cohn, 1987: 690). James Der Derian’s analysis of the post-Cold War world draws attention to the ethical imperative and technical capacity to “threaten and, if necessary, actualise violence from a distance with no or minimal casualties,” reinforcing the notion that wars can be fought in a clean and bloodless manner (2009: xxxi). More recently, feminists like Swati Parashar (2013), Christine Sylvester (2012) and Julia Welland (2015) point to the erasure of the lived experiences of those touched by war. It remains possible, as Elaine Scarry observes, to read pages upon pages of scholarship without ever encountering any reference to the fact that the “primary purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue” (1985: 64).

A thinker who has tried to foreground the materiality of the wounded body in her work is Adriana Cavarero. She argues that our failure to capture the devastating effects of contemporary conflict is rooted in language rather than the eccentricities of a specific discipline, such as IR. The problem, she argues, is that we have become reliant on a set of outdated and outmoded concepts that tend to conceal the destruction of the human body rather than reveal it. The language of terrorism, for example, is often used and abused by those seeking to delegitimise the actions of others (Asad 2007; Dexter 2012). What concerns Cavarero, however, is not that the term has been misappropriated but that it is simply the wrong word to use. The Latin verbs *terrero* and *tremo* – similar to the Greek terms *tremo* and *treo* – do not refer to the violence inflicted on the body of the victims but to the instinct to run away. “He [*sic*] who is gripped by terror, trembles and flees in order to survive, to save himself from a violence that is aiming to kill him” (Cavarero, 2011: 5). To put it simply, the language of terror is not about the destruction of the body but relates to our desire to escape death. Cavarero is equally unsatisfied with the language of war, which still invokes images of a gladiatorial battle on a grand scale, masking both the transformation of late-modern warfare and the pain and suffering it causes. It is easy to forget that “ground up bodies, limbs torn apart, carnage, and butchery are all part of its habitual theatre” (Cavarero, 2011: 12).

Violence may be becoming ever more ferocious and increasingly difficult to name but Cavarero argues that there is a linguistic code that is capable of doing justice to the materiality of the wounded body. The language of horror – or horrorism, as she terms it – is often used interchangeably with the language of terror despite having a very unique set of characteristics. Its Latin root *horrero* and its Greek counterpart *phrisso* both refer to the bristling sensation triggered by extreme fear or horror, which we now refer to as goose bumps (2011: 7-8). Indeed, the archaic medical term for this phenomenon was “horripilation”, which combines *horrere* (to stand on end) and *philus* (hair). Both terms also refer to the equally well-known sensation of becoming paralysed or frozen with fear. This is significant, Cavarero argues, because the language of horror forces us to confront – rather than runaway from – the dead and injured bodies that appear before us. As Cavarero explains:

The physics of horror has nothing to do with the instinctive reaction to the threat of death. It has rather to do with the instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill, because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability (2011: 8).

Dismembering the Body

The language of horrorism provides us with a useful tool for thinking about the violence inflicted by the Afghan Kill Team because it focuses attention on the victims rather than the perpetrators. When images of the abuse first filtered into the public sphere, much of the debate centred on what caused a group of seemingly ordinary soldiers to commit such extraordinary acts of violence. The Pentagon resurrected the “bad apples” narrative it used after Abu Ghraib, distancing itself from crimes that were both “repugnant to us as human beings and contrary to the standards and values of the United States Army” (DoD, 2011; see also Gebauer and Kazim, 2011). Snippets of an internal investigation which were leaked to the press suggest that the actual story was a little more complex, blaming senior officers for creating “an environment in which misconduct could occur.” In particular, the report identified “inattentiveness to administrative matters” and lax disciplinary standards (i.e. rolled-up shirt sleeves, using first names instead of ranks and prolific drug-use) as being contributory factors (Assmann, Goetz and Hujer 2011). Other commentators focused on broader social shifts, with Henry Giroux suggesting that the desecration of dead bodies was symptomatic of a culture in which “the pleasure of killing is not just normalised in war but increasingly hard-wired into American society” (2012: 266-267). These are all important points but the

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focus is on diagnosing the actions of the perpetrator rather than on the wounded bodies of the victims.

Cavarero's interest in the horror of contemporary conflict stems not from a pornographic fascination with the blood, the guts and the gore but with an interest in the dehumanising effects of a violence that no longer seems content with killing. The desecration of the injured body is horrifying, she argues, because it targets the individuality of the victim, hacking away at the corpse until it is no longer recognisably human. The example that Cavarero cites is of a suicide bomb attack on a supermarket in Jerusalem, which killed two 16-year-old girls (one of them was the perpetrator and the other, a bystander). The force of the blast was so powerful that it not only killed the two girls but obliterated their bodies, making it impossible for investigators to identify which body parts belonged to the victim and which body parts belonged to the perpetrator. Investigators didn't even realise that they were dealing with two separate bodies for a long time (2011: 104-105). Returning to the actions of the Afghan Kill Team, one can see a similar dehumanising logic at play, albeit in very different circumstances. Crucially though, the violence did not cease with the death of Gul Mudin but continued long after he was already dead, hacking away at what Cavarero has described as the "figural unity" of the body. As François Debrix and Alexander D. Barder explain:

Horror strives to destroy bodies and lives and works to eradicate any trace of humanity ... [by reducing them to] an indistinguishable mass of fleshy matter out of which neither recognition nor rejection can be ascertained (2013: 92).

The destruction of Mudin's corpse may not have been as absolute as the two bodies in the suicide bomb attack but the dehumanising effects are the same. In the second incident, members of the Afghan Kill Team shot an unnamed man they found cowering at the side of the road late one evening. They initially suspected him of planting an improvised explosive device and confronted him but the man started acting erratically (Boal 2011). The unit opened fire but used so many bullets that they managed to blast part of his skull off. When they discovered the man was unarmed, they tried to justify an attack by planting a weapon next to his body. It later materialised that the man they had killed was deaf and possibly intellectually disabled. This did not, however, stop one soldier from removing part of the man's skull to keep as a human trophy (Goetz and Hujer, 2011). In the third incident involving members of the unit, a 45-year-old man named Mullah Allah Dad was frogmarched out of his house during a routine search in the village of Qualaday and then killed in another fake combat scenario (this time an old Russian grenade was detonated to make it look like he had attacked them). Using a powerful M249 machine gun, they not only killed the man but managed to tear entire limbs from his torso before removing fingers and teeth to take home (Goetz and Hujer, 2011). Once back on base, these body parts were traded for pornography, used as part of pranks and even gambled away during a game of cards (Boal 2011).

Violence and Vulnerability

The violence inflicted by the Afghan Kill Team was responsible for the dehumanisation of their victims. The fragments of flesh and bone they traded and the photographs of mutilated bodies they disseminated were stripped of anything that might identify the victims as unique and singular beings. The victims were quite literally reduced to mere objects: a discarded limb, a severed fingered, a splintered bone and a collection of teeth. In other words, it represented an attack on their personhood – their very status as a recognisable human being – rather than just an attack on them as a person.

What the language of horror cannot explain, however, is why it is that certain populations seem so much more vulnerable and their bodies so much more injurable than other populations. Cavarero broaches the subject of vulnerability from a decidedly Arendtian perspective, suggesting that our physical presence in the world is what makes us recognisable to others but also what leaves us exposed or susceptible to attack (see Weber 2014: 239-240). But as Judith Butler reminds us, the human body cannot be viewed in purely physical or biological terms because it cannot be understood without recourse to some ideality or normative scheme (2004a: 28). The racial, gendered and civilisational norms that precede the body effectively determine whose counts as human. As Butler explains:

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Specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are not lived nor lost in the full sense (Butler 2009: 1).

Thus, if certain bodies are not recognised as being fully human, then they are likely to be much more vulnerable to such extreme and excessive levels of violence.

The language used by members of the Afghan Kill Team would certainly seem to support this contention. When Morlock was first questioned about his involvement in the attack on Mudin, he confessed that he and his colleagues would often refer to Afghans as “savages” and “pieces of shit” (quoted in Krauss 2013). Talking about Staff Sergeant Gibbs, one of the more experienced officers in the platoon, Morlock claimed that he had a “pure hatred for all Afghans [*sic*] and constantly referred to them as savages” (quoted in Whitlock, 2010). When Gibbs was asked about this during his trial and how he was able to inflict such cruel and inhumane violence on the body of another human being, he responded by saying that it was no different to taking “the antlers off a deer” (quoted in McGreal 2011). Morlock adopted a similar attitude to killing Mudin, claiming that “he didn’t register as a person, he was just there” (quoted in Krauss 2013). As Butler has argued, “if violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated” (Butler, 2004b: 33).

Conclusion

The extraordinary level of pain and suffering that was inflicted on the body of Gul Mudin and many others speaks to the peculiar relationship between violence and the body. Often this violence is understood in purely instrumental terms, focusing on the ways in which violence can be used as a tool to achieve certain political or military objectives. But the excessive and unnecessary nature of this violence, which was evident in the deliberate destruction and desecration of the corpse *post mortem*, suggests that something might get left out if we only consider these acts in instrumental terms. There seems to be an additional, performative dimension to these incidents. The violence did not simply kill its victims but was complicit in a dehumanising logic that left them almost unrecognisable as human beings. Reduced to their constituent parts, the dismembered bodies appear only as heaps of meat rather than individuals with names, faces and stories to tell. They were – in the eyes of the perpetrators, at least – nothing more than bits of flesh and bone that could be collected, traded and exchanged. At the same time, we must not lose sight on the racial violence that underpins and enables these kinds of attack. The language used by members of the Afghan Kill Team, even after they had been arrested and detained, suggests that they did not view their victims as fellow human beings. If we want to understand the brutal reality of these acts, we must also pay attention to the dehumanising rhetoric or normative violence that constitutes certain populations as profoundly disposable, their bodies eminently injurable and their deaths so ungrivable.

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