



Grinning at horrors: gender and visual triumphalism

Omri Herzog & Idan Yaron

To cite this article: Omri Herzog & Idan Yaron (2021): Grinning at horrors: gender and visual triumphalism, Journal of Visual Literacy, DOI: [10.1080/1051144X.2021.1974773](https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2021.1974773)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144X.2021.1974773>



Published online: 17 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ARTICLE



Grinning at horrors: gender and visual triumphalism

Omri Herzog^a and Idan Yaron^b

^aCulture Studies, Sapir College: Sapir Academic College, Sderot, Israel; ^bIndependent Scholar, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article offers a reading of visually and ethically disturbing images, published over the past two decades, that have earned far-reaching exposure: photographs of male and female soldiers grin as they observe horrific sights. In most cases, these images, uploaded to social media, sparked a heated international debate. Perhaps more than other visual elements in these photos, it was the female soldiers' *smiles* against the backdrop of atrocities that gained a greater presence in the eye of the media storm that had ensued, earning far more attention than the smiles of the soldiers' male counterparts. Indeed, this visual imagery directly indicates the construction of femininity and masculinity within militaristic-cultural contexts and dictates its own ideological perceptions and moral judgments. A reading of the smile's meanings in this context raises issues connected to the anthropology of physical gestures and the theory of photography, as well as to current ideological-ethical issues. This article comprises three pivotal interpretations, and while each framework construes the meaning of the smile in its own way, gendered visual literacy underlies all of them. By using this case study in order to point to visual literacy's seminal role in critical interpretation, we aim to demonstrate the cruciality of feminist visual literacy in a multi-dimensional analysis of visual imagery.

KEYWORDS

Physical gestures; militarism; Abu Gharib; photography; trophy shots; ready smile; professional smile; feminist visual literacy; visual semiotics

In December 2004, a group portrait of Israeli combat soldiers posed alongside the corpse of Hamas member, Iyad Batat, then uploaded the photo to social media. The photo was posted on the website of the *Haaretz* newspaper. The article quoted one soldier saying: 'Everyone wanted pictures. [...] We sat next to the body, shared experiences, just looking and messing around'. The photo was described as: 'Iyad Batat on the stretcher, [...] his left arm flung back and his right arm flopping to the side. His eyes are wide open. All the soldiers surrounding him are smiling, some grinning broadly as if the photographer had instructed them to say 'cheese'. They arrange themselves in a classic pose, like hunters with their trophy' (Haaretz, 12 December 2004).

Smiling selfies of male and female soldiers alongside handcuffed detainees or next to corpses, uploaded to social networks, were a common phenomenon in the early 2000s. An Israeli daily newspaper reported that 'Photos of soldiers with the bodies of

CONTACT Omri Herzog  omri.herzog@gmail.com  Culture Studies, Sapir College: Sapir Academic College, 20 Adam Hacothen, Tel Aviv, 6458525, Tel Aviv District, Israel; Idan Yaron  Independent Scholar, 3 Mor St., Zur Hadassah, 9987500, Israel

© 2021 International Visual Literacy Association

terrorists in various poses have become a real phenomenon in the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] – in every corps, every unit, almost everywhere that soldiers come into contact with Palestinian terrorists’ (Yediot Aharonot, 17 November 2004).

Images of that sort are far from unusual in the context of military operations, aided by the technological ease and immediacy of self-documentation. They act as spoils of war, declarations of symbolic capital in the military and national contexts. But what triggered a vociferous public controversy with a moral nature, around those photos, were the soldiers’ broad smiles – especially the female soldiers’ – as they posed next to handcuffed, tortured, or dead bodies.

A smile itself usually signifies positive emotions – pleasure, physical or sensory gratification, friendliness, and kindness. It can evoke pleasure in both the observer and the smiler, and can also affect the behaviour of others. When people meet for the first time, smiles can arouse trust and collaboration (Scharlemann, 2001), and smiling people are considered amiable, honest, sociable, carefree, relaxed, and more attractive than others (Sander & Scherer, 2009). If so, what is the smile’s symbolic function in a violent, morbid context, where it ostensibly has no place?

Feminist literacy in visual analysis

This article seeks to examine the smile against the backdrop of a horrific image, and to analyze its visual, emotional, and ideological functions. We shall use a gendered perspective, which accompanies the substance and the acceptance of that visual phenomenon and offers alternative interpretive options for its analysis.

Our methodological premise is rooted in the discipline of visual literacy, which encourages critical thinking through a semiotic system enabling a multidimensional view of a visual phenomenon (Edwards, 2012). Visual literacy’s challenge is to lift the veil of familiarity and self-evidence which surrounds the visual image (Mitchell, 2005), and to reveal all its overt and covert meanings (Fransecky & Debes, 1969; Messaris, 1994, 1998). As we hope to demonstrate in the case study in question, those meanings are rooted in interdisciplinary contexts, including historical, anthropological, psychological, physiological, and political ones.

A literacy perspective of the kind we aim to demonstrate here seeks to examine the image as a representation which documents a subjective reality, rooted in a point of view and simultaneously performing its contextualization. It reveals ideological messages that shape worldviews, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions, stemming from the image’s content, the context in which it appears, the visual traditions it responds to, and its reception (Berger, 1972). These four arenas are interwoven within the semiotic system of the image, because only in that way can they identify the emotional, political, moral, and aesthetic functions which the image serves, reconstructs, or subverts (Messaris, 1998).

In our analysis, we use “feminist visual literacy”, an essential methodology for opening and exploring the relationship between sexuality, gender, and visual representations (which frequently express limited, repetitive, and stereotypical perceptions of gender roles), and tracing their implications for our psychological perceptions, fantasies, and emotions (Carson, 2016). Visual literacy (like cultural critique in general) stems

from the development of gender studies, which by nature cross-disciplinary contexts and undermine them. Visual literacy uses the basic assumptions of feminist inquiry as it questions the 'naturalness' of cultural representations, and examines the cultural development governing their reception. It discloses the political nature of 'personal' or 'private' phenomena and experiences (like images taken from private photo albums and uploaded to social networks, on which we focus here); and it does not award a single discipline the authority to 'lock' the image and its interpretation (Messaris, 1994). It opens it to multidimensional movement, which does not necessarily allow a conclusive, single meaning, but rather broadens the perspective to alternative critical options, which illuminate the phenomenon with varying intensity and interpretive opportunities.

The paper, therefore, uses tools of visual literacy, with emphasis on the feminist approach, to explore the smile's visual status, to map the conventions of its presence in selected images with an exploration of their anthropological and psycho-social aspects, and thus understand its status in a specific field of societal conduct. We deal principally with literacy in the digital arena, where history is immediately represented in available visual images uploaded in a user-friendly way (Mitchell, 2011). Digital media have a central role in self-evidencing practices (such as selfies) and the culture of auto-documentation they produce. Moreover, due to the material environment of the distribution and accessibility of images, they are woven into our political and moral socio-cultural frameworks from which they are observed and interpreted (Frosh, 2019). They point to their profound ability to mesh with everyday life and to activate and extend life-worlds.

The smile those images display has obvious neurological and psychological significances, but its various appearances have a performative nature: the smile signifies a visual convention while attesting its gendered and political contexts. Thus, we will be analyzing the photographed smiles of soldiers alongside handcuffed, tortured, or dead people, with a distinction between the smiles of females and those of males in that context. This distinction, we will argue, is central to the reception of those photographs and modes of their interpretation.

What is a smile?

From the physiological perspective, the smile is a facial expression created by the stretching of muscles, particularly those at the sides of the mouth, and around the eyes. The most familiar smile in the research literature is the 'Duchenne smile', named after the French neurologist (Duchenne de Boulogne, 1862/1990). It is created as an involuntary emotional response and includes the movement of the two *zygomaticus major* muscles on each side of the mouth, and the *orbicularis oculi* muscles at the corner of the eyes.

The ability to smile and to recognize smiles develops early in life. In infancy, a smile is an interaction between parent and child, which reciprocally transfers a positive emotion. It is a spontaneous action, not dependent on compensation or performance. When the infant acquires this behaviour, it is generalized towards others as a form of social interaction, and can quickly assume different types of instrumental value (Babad et al., 1983).

A smile that is not dependent on rewards and performance is known as a ‘natural smile’ or a ‘true smile’. It includes lifting the cheeks (typical to a situation in which the infant has eye contact with the smiling mother figure). A non-natural or forced smile, in which the cheeks are not lifted, is typical of a social gesture that does not necessarily evidence a positive emotion, such as raising an indifferent hand to an unfamiliar person (Babad et al., 1983). Duchenne wrote:

The emotion of frank joy is expressed in the face by the combined contraction of the zygomaticus major muscle and the *orbicularis oculi*. The first obeys the will but the second is only put in play by the sweet emotions of the soul; the false joy, the deceitful laugh cannot provoke the contraction of this latter muscle. The muscle around the eye does not obey the will; it is only brought into play by a true feeling, by an agreeable emotion. Its inertia, in smiling, unmasks a false friend. (Duchenne de Boulogne, 1862/1990, p. 72)

In the pre-modern era, representations of natural smiles were generally identified with shallowness and idiocy. A character in a Charles Dickens novel, a portrait-painter, reveals that ‘There are only two styles of portrait painting; the serious and the smirk; and we always use the serious for professional people (except actors sometimes), and the smirk for private ladies and gentlemen who do not care so much about looking clever’ (Dickens, 1839).

The art historian Schroeder maintains that in art, a smile typifies only members of the lower class, or people suffering disabilities (Schroeder, 1998). Trumble adds: ‘As far as I could see, most of the bared teeth and open mouths in art were those of neglected old men, the downtrodden, drunks, prostitutes, gypsies, people in a state of religious ecstasy, dwarves, sleepwalkers, monsters, ghosts, the moonstruck and cursed, and tax-collectors’ (Trumble, 2004). In European art, the teeth-revealing smiles of women signify that they are scandalous and corrupt since visual images of bared teeth indicated lust and sensuality (Schroeder, 1998).

The smile gained social legitimacy from the mid-nineteenth century; reflecting the class-related attributes of this gesture, the fake smile was encouraged and perceived as a sign of politeness or habit, and is part of the repertoire of courteous behaviour, chiefly in contexts of modern service-providing (Trumble, 2004). The ‘Pan American smile’, for example, is a voluntary smile in which the zygomatic muscles contract only at the sides of the mouth – like the smile with which flight attendants welcome boarding passengers (hence the smile is named after an airline). It is considered an artificial smile and is often referred to as ‘a professional smile’. During their training, aircrew undergoes special training in ‘relaxing and smiling’. Working with emotions, including how to produce fake smiles, is part of their job descriptions, and features in professional training guides (Kotchemidova, 2005a).

The fake smile is an effective social gesture because we have a hard time distinguishing between fake emotions and genuine ones. Often only experts can pinpoint the difference (Ekman, 2007). Hermann Melville remarked in this regard that ‘a smile is the chosen vehicle for all ambiguities’ (Melville, 1949). Interpretive ambiguity is also an aspect of both types of smiles: a natural smile is a sign of spontaneity and reflects joy, pleasure, or good nature, but also superficiality and lack of sophistication. An unnatural smile indicates courtesy and politeness, or deceit and concealment (Trumble,

2004). Its appearances, as well as its interpretive contexts, are associated with guidelines for behavioural patterns and enforced by social norms.

Two ideological contexts help to understand the manifestations of the smile. The first entails gender-related distinctions: Western culture has rules for gender representation, maintaining that a smile is more feminine than a masculine gesture (LaFrance, 2003). Hall published the first meta-analysis, based on twenty previous studies, showing that women tend to smile more than men (Hall, 1984). These findings may be explained by the 'dominance effect', according to which individuals in submissive positions smile more than those in positions of control. Since men are often in dominant positions, they tend to smile less and underestimate the others' smiles, comparing to women (Scharlemann, 2001).

The second entails the capitalist emotional culture. American historians of emotions indicate a major transition by the end of the eighteenth century, from melancholy to cheerfulness. From the twentieth century on, the American temperament was marked by friendliness towards others and a tendency for egocentric bragging. While the first tendency is directed to others and the second is self-directed, they communicate with each other through gaiety. Cheerfulness has been shown to be significant in consumer culture, for its competitive and achievement-linked values, and its visual registering is primarily expressed through smiles (Kotchmidova 2005a).

Before photographers instructed subjects facing the camera to put on a smiling face – a visual trend which started in the 1920s – the positions of a figure for public documentation purposes seemed emotionally and physically restrained. The rules of etiquette required, for example, strict control of the mouth, and the criteria for beauty included a small, pursed mouth (Kotchmidova, 2005a). Only when the camera was taken out of the studio and became a mass consumer product did smiles start appearing in photographs to evidence satisfaction and happiness (Flynt, 2009). From the 1920s on, the smile as the immediate symbolic expression of human happiness became a representative cliché. That change had many faces, including, as Schroeder explains, the development of orthodontics and the burgeoning industry of products which promised straight, white, and shiny teeth, which became evidence of belonging to the affluent classes (Schroeder, 1998).

The photographed smile became more widespread with the advertising industry's growing impact. Marketing messages made a transition from rational arguments to emotional perceptions of a brand, dictating happiness and self-satisfaction as constitutive emotions of the consumer experience. The smile is a definitive image of happiness, but is also effective as a marketing tool because when we see someone smiling, we can hardly avoid smiling back; and when we smile back, we experience a certain amount of pleasure. That is why advertisers aim to associate a product with a smiling (especially female) face. Beginning in the 1940s, that advertising approach, which presented smiles as evidence of consumer well-being, migrated to the popular photography culture, when amateur photographers started emulating the smiling images of professional advertisements (Kotchmidova, 2005b).

Smiles and killing

In contemporary Western culture, images of smiling faces also appear against the backdrop of bleaker settings – alongside threatening images of death, torture or abuse of animals and humans. Its beginnings can be traced to the 1950s when the practice of ‘trophy shots’ developed among hunters. Those photos generally feature white male hunters, proudly displaying dead animals or parts of their bodies. One such hunter commented: ‘Hunting terminates in a collection of memories; and although memories of hunting stay in your mind, nothing captures the moment better than photographs. [...] I made huge efforts to get good photos of almost all the hunted animals I killed’ (quot. in Brower, 2005) (Figure 1).

Taking a ‘victory trophy’ in wartime is an ancient custom, as old as war itself. The war historian Paul Cornish commented that ‘the trophy item, unlike a souvenir, is inherently something taken from the enemy by force – and thus defined as a form of war spoils. Trophy items are likely to have a purely symbolic value, sometimes even a monetary one’ (Cornish, 2009). The trophy shot is a visual expression of that convention: it testifies to life that was taken by force, and also documents the heroic victory of the fighter-hunter against the enemy.

Research by Kalof and Fitzgerald (2003) which surveyed 800 trophy shots printed in fourteen periodicals devoted to hunting, elicited that the most common visual images show white men smiling to the camera, and kneeling on the ground alongside or behind their booty. The smile which accompanies the victory shot attests to satisfaction with the diversity of hunted animals, thus confirming human superiority over the defeated natural environment, as well as corroborating stereotypical male attributes, such as mastery, control of space, aggressiveness, achievement, and physical superiority. The smile is conditional and suggestive because it reveals visual evidence concerning the self-fulfillment of those sought-after masculine attributes (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003). Photographs of female hunters are rare, and only half of the photographs in



Figure 1. The mayor of Nes-Tziona, a city in Israel, next to his prey. Photograph by Somerby Safaris PR, 2018 (Courtesy of Somerby Safaris).



ALJAZEERA

News

Coronavirus

Features

Economy

Opinion

Video

More

Features

The scars of Abu Ghraib

An Iraqi man still suffers from his ordeal at the infamous prison, as does his family.



American personnel stand behind a pyramid of naked Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison [AP/The New Yorker]

By Jane Arraf

15 Jul 2013



Baghdad, Iraq – Taleb al-Maleji sits on the carpet and concentrates on smoking a cigarette and not biting himself.

The sleeves of his checkered shirt end just above his thin wrists – shiny black and purple in spots where the skin has repeatedly been bitten off and healed over. The scars are not from the year he spent in Abu Ghraib prison but from compulsively biting his wrists and fingers when he thinks

Figure 2. Screenshot of Al-Gazeera Website, 15.7.2013.

which they do appear also feature weapons – objects which usually appear in photographs of male hunters. As a rule, women are presented in trophy shots in stereotypical ways, usually in the secondary role of admiring female escorts.

Over the past two decades, images appeared on social media presenting smiles alongside human corpses or at sites where human beings are abused in military contexts. While photographs of smiles in the face of death or human misery bear witness to psychopathic brutality and are socially judged as a moral crime, in the military context they are only critically perceived as pranks, poor taste, or the result of failing to exercise discretion. Accordingly, smiles in the face of scenes of horror in military contexts receive greater legitimacy than similar images of civilians, and so their incidence in the visual landscape is greater. An infamous example is the photographs of American soldiers serving in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq during the Gulf War (Figure 2).¹

While the abuse of enemy corpses and the pleasure deriving from them was not an unusual phenomenon in human history, the visual-documentary context of such scenes was created in the early twentieth century. During the first and second world wars, American soldiers were frequently photographed next to humiliated or dead

enemy troops. The growing use of cheap mass-produced cameras during the Vietnam War intensified the tendency to photograph such scenes. An American soldier who served in that war said: 'The unit's soldiers would use the flash button on the camera to get trophy shots for their girlfriends back home' (Bourke, 2005). The use of the flash button on the camera is a powerful act; the shot of pictures is a form of a gun's shot. Susan Sontag wrote: 'To photograph implies purchasing a hold over the photographed object. It implies creating a certain aggressive attitude towards the world' (Sontag, 1977).

In the Israeli context, for example, such shots became common with photographs of IDF soldiers next to corpses of Palestinians. In October 2001, an article appeared in a local newspaper, noting:

Almost every combat soldier in the IDF, particularly those serving in Lebanon, is familiar with the custom: sometimes it is only a photographed corpse, and sometimes with soldiers posed next to or treading on it. It happens in combat units in recent years and increased hugely during the Lebanon War (Kol Ha'ir, 5 October 2001).

In November 2004, a national newspaper published an article titled 'Soldiers photographed with the remains of terrorists', and revealed:

This is how soldiers abused terrorists' corpses. The commander asked his men to photograph him with a severed head skewered by an iron rod, like a scarecrow, with a cigarette in his mouth. Terrorist corpses are a 'must have' item in photo albums of combat soldiers (Yediot Aharonot, 17 November 2004).

Ariella Azoulay, a visual-cultural scholar, describes one such photo, showing two soldiers standing over the corpse of a Palestinian:

[T]he soldiers are in uniform, wearing helmets and armed with submachine guns like soldiers in operational activity. In the photograph, they are relaxed, as if they have just finished their main task and now have time to record the day's achievements. Each has a rifle slung over his shoulders, with the weapon trained on the corpse of the Palestinian lying on the ground. One soldier looks at the corpse beneath them, the other looks at the camera. One is laughing as he gestures as if saying "take a look." The other soldier has the smile of someone getting ready for a photo, he wants to come out of it looking good. Maybe he was once taught that you must smile for a photograph, otherwise, the result will be a forced, frozen photo. The situation seems inappropriate for a photograph, for a smile (Azoulay, 2012, p. 139).

In the past, war photography was the exclusive field of press photographers, while now soldiers document their war, their pleasures, what they consider picturesque, and also their crimes – and share the images among themselves, and upload them to social media indiscriminately (New York Times, 23 May 2004). A female soldier serving in a regional brigade stationed in Hebron related: 'photographs of terrorists after they were killed [...] got into computers in the base, through army email, and they were commonly used as screensavers' ('Breaking the Silence' report, 2009).



Figure 3. Sabrina Harman at Abu Ghraib prison [Public domain]. Source: Wikipedia.

Interpretations of smiles against the backdrop of horrors

Soldiers photograph themselves, usually in the forefront of the photos, with smiling faces, alongside corpses or fettered detainees. What are the meanings of their smiles?

We would like to present a few alternatives or rather supplementary interpretations of smiles against a horrific background – ranging along a continuum from a neuro-physical, through a social-professional, to a political-moral one. What is common to all the interpretations is the gendered context of the smile; that context's centrality stems from the fact that photographs of smiling female soldiers spark off far greater public debate than photos of smiling males. The vast majority of subjects in those pictures are men; but it was photos of females against a background of abuse and death that generated a media storm and a public moral debate, more than those of men (Puar, 2007). Thus, the reception of photographs with a significantly gendered character directly affects and moulds their interpretive options.

The conditioned, ready smile

Ariella Azoulay comments that whenever a camera is present, things happen around it – it can attract events around it, as if magnetically, and can even generate events (Azoulay, 2012). The most immediate event that the camera's presence arouses is the 'ready smile,' for it is hard to withstand the social conditioning which associates the camera's click with a smile. However, harrowing the context, doesn't necessarily disrupt that conditioning. Susan Sontag noted:

The expression of satisfaction at the acts of torture being inflicted on helpless, trussed, naked victims is only part of the story. There is the deep satisfaction of being photographed, to which one is now more inclined to respond not with a stiff, direct gaze

(as in former times) but with glee. The events are in part designed to be photographed. The grin is a grin for the camera (New York Times, 23 May 2004).

Like any photo, those taken alongside corpses subordinate the context to the conditioned smile. They banalize the context, which is shunted to the backstage of the photographed mise-en-scène, while the smile takes frontstage. Accordingly, they are not seen as having distinct political or moral importance; their place is in collections of selfies, not for social or political evidence collection.

The ready nature of the smiles of soldiers, posed next to bodies, indicates that they are fake smiles, not natural or genuine. The director of the film *Standard Operating Procedure* says that the public's sense of alarm over the widely shared photographs of American soldier Sabrina Harman in the Abu Ghraib jail led him to contact Paul Ekman, a professor emeritus of psychology at UC San Francisco, whose expertise is the research of emotions and facial expressions. After studying one of the photographs in which the grinning Harman leans over a mutilated corpse, Ekman wrote:

She is showing a social smile or a smile for the camera. The signs of an actual enjoyment smile are just not there. There is no sign of any negative emotion. She is doing what people always do when they pose for a camera. They put on a big, broad smile, but they are not actually genuinely enjoying themselves. We would see movement in the eye cover fold. That is the area of the skin below the eyebrow before the eyelid. And it moves slightly down only with genuine enjoyment. [...] In one of her pictures I get a chance to see her with no emotion on her face. So, I can see what the eye cover fold looks like when she is not smiling. And it is just the same as with the smile. That is the crucial difference between what I call a Duchenne smile [...] and the forced smile, the social smile (New York Times, 19 May 2008).² (Figure 3)

Harman herself said in the film *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*:

It's only a dead guy. [...] My smile, I always smile at a camera. It's the natural thing you do in front of a camera. It really wasn't something negative about the guy. It was just to say, "Hey, look, it's a dead guy. We're with a dead guy." It wasn't anything – I guess we weren't really thinking, "Hey, this guy has family," or anything like that, or "Hey, this guy was just murdered." It was just, "Hey, it's a dead guy, it'd be cool to get a photo next to a dead person." I mean that was it. That was the extent of that one. I know it looks bad. I mean, even when I look at [the photographs], I go, "Oh Jesus, that does look pretty bad." [But] if a soldier sees somebody dead, normally they'll take photos of it.

The authors of *The Ballad of Abu Ghraib* described Harman:

She loved to look. Maybe she was deterred by violence, but she was attracted to its outcomes. She could look at almost anything, and when others didn't want to look, she actually chose to look close-up. Injuries and dead bodies fascinated her. She didn't hide it. [...] In July she wrote home to her father: "On June 23 I saw a corpse, it's the first corpse I've ever seen. So of course I took a pic!" She was also photographed in the morgue, leaning over a charred corpse, her rosy cheeks a few centimetres away from the holes of the scarred eyes. She's smiling – a forced but enthusiastic smile – her clenched right hand making a thumb's up (Gourevitch & Morris, 2008, p. 55).

The smile's banalization against the backdrop of horrendous scenes is discernible in a press interview given by Meital Sandler, an Israeli soldier who served as a medick in the Occupied Territories. She described the custom of washing the corpses of Palestinians. On one occasion, '[S]omething very funny happened, he had an erection.

A corpse with an erection. We laughed a bit because it was embarrassing. [...] without thinking at all, I said: 'take a picture of him', and I sat by the body and she took my picture (Haaretz, 7 November 2007).

A smile reflects curiosity about an unusual life event, and documenting it chiefly reflects the immediate tendency to over-document, as a contemporary practice of structuring subjectivity. In this interpretation, documentation – and the smile accompanying it – is automatic and unreflective. When it neutralizes the threatening impression of an appalling sight, it also neutralizes any political or moral status relating to it.

The heated public discourse around Sabrina Harman's smile had an obviously gendered context. Through a 'ready smile' prism, Harman's smiles are automatic, as are her fellow male soldiers', but could also be related to emotionally charged and negative circumstances. In face of such, women tend to do intensified 'emotion work' to generate and preserve affirmative emotions, to neutralize and allay negative feelings in themselves and others. A smile is an available, effective means of achieving those results (LaFrance, 2003). Researchers contend that in situations of social stress or moral ambivalence, women assume the role of neutralizing and defusing the tension (Hall & Halberstadt, 1986). In other words, Harman's smile may attest to a dual reaction, both to the banality of the camera's presence and to the gendered way of banalizing a tense situation.

The social-professional smile

An additional interpretation, or rather a supplementary one, for the nature of smiles set against sites of horror, relates to the social context where the photograph is produced.

Groups trying to maintain a social identity and express displays of friendship, fraternity, and social connection, activate norms of uniform reaction to experiences unique to them. Smiling when a group event is being recorded is a common way of proving group belonging, so the trivial nature of the smile entails not only the actual operation of the camera but the self-documentation of a shared group experience.

A commander of an IDF infantry battalion spoke about photographs taken with a background of corpses of wanted people: 'For soldiers, it's part of the army experience, like photographs taken at a platoon evening, a trip, or another activity' (Yediot Aharonot, 18 November 2004). A female soldier in field intelligence commented: 'We see a lot of it, it's part of our shared experience, [...] what happens to us on a daily basis' ('Breaking the Silence' report, 2009). Photos of female and male soldiers, smiling against a background of operational contexts, are like end-of-course pictures, kept as souvenirs, as another soldier testifies: 'As soon as you see a camera, everyone runs to stand behind the bodies, to get in the frame. It's a souvenir of one of the most turbulent nights of our lives' (Haaretz, 12 April 2010).

Photos are used in the documenting repertoire of belonging to defined groups, that acts simultaneously as a personal and collective landmark. The individual biography of a group's member – with the distinctive experiences and sense of achievement arising from it – also reflects the collective biography. Accordingly, a group event is considered a unique photo opportunity, and may also explain the incidence

of photographs with a background of bodies or detainees. As soldiers explained: 'It's just part of the album. You photograph the end of basic training? Take pictures at the end of a course? So you also take photos of piles of bodies' (Yediot Aharonot, 17 November 2004); 'We [combat soldiers] took pictures to mark the assassination, following an ambush, [...] it was a highlight of our army service' (Haaretz, 11 July 2007).

The feeling of collective achievement is present in photographs, and in those terms, the scenes' inherent horror is secondary. It is on the outskirts of the photographs, and serves to record the achievement, but not the horror per se. A soldier pointed out: 'A photo with a corpse sounds bad, but basically – it's just a photo which documents fighting' (Yediot Aharonot, 18 November 2004). Ethical dilemmas over the nature of documentation (sometimes also the nature of the activity itself), are defeated by the group dynamic which encourages and authorizes them as a mechanism of belonging and self-identity. A female soldier recollected while noting the impact of social pressure:

I don't remember exactly what my dilemmas were, but I do remember I wasn't always at ease with my reaction. I knew I wasn't being genuine; I knew something was off. [...] And that's what I tell everyone, looking at the blood of a dead man, that's not okay. And I remember having that feeling, but still you get swept away, the others encourage you. There's not enough action, so let's make some, let's laugh about it and take pictures with detainees because it's okay if I get a picture like that with two guys, our soldiers, grinning ('Breaking the Silence' report, 2009, p. 5).

In August 2010, Israeli and international newspapers published photographs of Eden Abergil, an Israeli former female soldier who had been photographed grinning alongside handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinian detainees. She uploaded the photos to Facebook, captioning them: 'The IDF – the best time of my life'. Interviewed after the media storm her photos launched, she tried to downplay the photos' moral context by stressing their virtual and collective contexts. She said: 'I don't regret anything I did and I'm not apologizing. I didn't harm anyone. [...] Everyone takes photographs next to Palestinian prisoners'. Some foreign media reports compared her to Sabrina Harman, and her response was: 'I don't know how to cope with that comparison, it's revolting. I don't deserve anything like that. [...] If the Palestinians were in my place, they'd also take pictures with me. It happens around the world, every day' (Haaretz, 18 August 2010).

Figure 4

Abergil related to her photograph as trivial and emphasized the collective, even universal context, of the photographic act: 'The photographs reflected a social experience' (Haaretz, 17.8.2010); 'they aimed to show our friends the atmosphere we live in' (Globes, 17.8.2020).³

However, the social-professional phenomenon is mostly gendered sensitive. Errol Morris, director of the film *Standard Operating Procedure* which deals with events in Abu Ghraib jail, wrote about Sabrina Harman: 'I often think about Sabrina being a female in the military, trying to show that she is in command, a master of her emotions – not cowed by her experiences but in control' (New York Times, 19 May 2008). Smiles of women photographed against acts of horror are indeed evidence of how female combat soldiers take on a public-visual masculine identity, to find their place

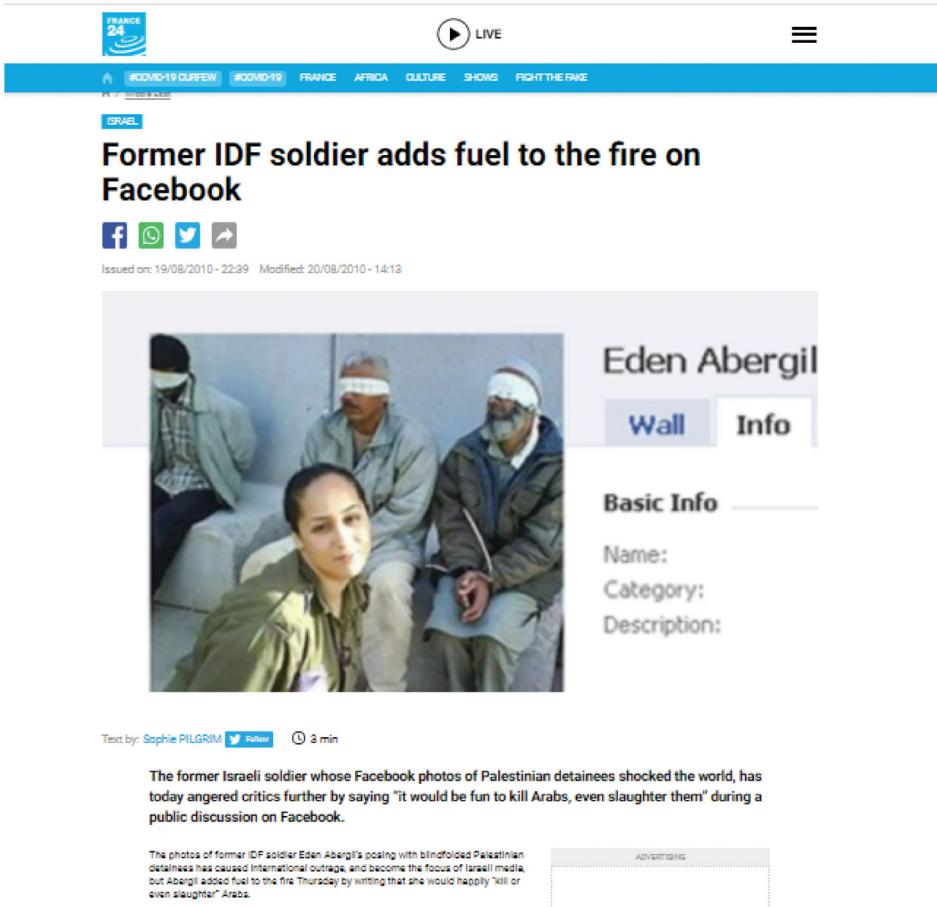


Figure 4. Screenshot of France24 website, 20.8.2010.

in the collective which adopted them. With smiles, they appropriate the militaristic masculine dominance that is grounded on aggression and triumphalism.

The media's focus on Harman and Abergil's smiles and the moral outrage that followed the public gaze at them – the gaze which Laura Mulvey described as the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) – derived from the violated traditional identity of the smile as expressing a feminine role, associated with the ethos of compassion, concern, and empathy (Gilligan, 1977).

The two women's smiles diverge from the smile's gendered identity and therefore possess resonating power regarding the flexibility of gendered roles in general, and in military contexts particularly. Tamar Yarom, director of the film *To see if I'm smiling* (2007), in which six women recall the service in combat roles, described her own service as a welfare NCO in an infantry company. She noted: 'Women are expected to be sensitive and empathic, often the situation is stronger than gender and instincts' (Haaretz, 7 November 2007). Talking about the name of her movie, Yarom adds:

'There's something in the smile which we always see as positive; precisely in this context, the smile's significance is transposed' (<https://hahem.co.il/uri/?p=38450>).

Indeed, in a military operational context, group conformism has a masculine nature, and female soldiers adopt the smile, just as they take on the sort of speech or body language associated with hyper-masculinity. The smile's visual power thus entails a social context. It is not necessarily focussed on the actual smile set against horrors and violence but on the issue of female soldiers' smiles which they have adapted to match the norms of a group defined by its masculinity.

The smile of victory

The two previous explanations for the smiles in front of horrific scenes describe the automatic-artificial readiness of the smile facing a camera, or as a form of response to the professional-emotional conformism of a male ascription group. They do not linger over the political-moral dimensions rooted in the gesture of smiles alongside a corpse or humiliated people, in the background of the photographed subjects.

The historical context of hunters' 'trophy shots' lets us examine those images in a moral and ideological context. Such shots have had a social role: they recorded the hunters' bravery, their superiority and masculinity, and offered the audience of viewers evidence of their killing skills, control, and power (Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003).

Sontag addresses the aspect of power inherent in the photographic act, which functions as an authoritative means for acquiring control over the other. To photograph implies creating a certain attitude to the world, an image of themselves' (Sontag, 1977). In those terms, the thematic and composition of trophy shots illustrate the power relations they document. Carrington, describing his experiences in the First World War, analyzed the sociological context of the phenomenon of victory souvenirs: 'to be soldiers in active service means rejecting the sanctity of life and property. Their objective in battle is to force the enemy to surrender, and if they succeed, his body and property enter your possession' (Carrington, 1965). Photographing the defeated enemy thus signifies his objectification, and at the same time testifies to his ownership as an object.

Like the hunters' trophy shots, the smiles of men and women soldiers shown previously, indicate a position of dominance, not subordination identified generally with smiles (Scharlemann et al., 2001). More precisely, they represent patriarchal and colonialist positions centering around the right to demonstrate power and control of others, and through them to obtain gratification. The photographs are evidence that situations in which subjects are found in positions of power may often run counter to personal tendencies or attitudes, which may characterize them in other aspects of life (Zimbardo, 2007).

The pivotal process in these situations is one of dehumanization: specific 'others' or a collective, are considered subhuman; they cannot be compared in terms of humanity or personal dignity to those who tag them (Rushdy, 2000). Negative stereotypes, in the form of insulting images or expressions, humiliate their subjects and represent them as inferior. 'Hostile similarity' drives ordinary people to hate members of other social, ethnic or national groups, to the extent that they would be ready to torture

and even kill them. Moreover, images of the 'enemy' are a highly powerful motivation for soldiers who load their guns and ammunition with hate and fear (Zimbardo, 2007).

Like the hunters' trophy shots, the soldiers' photos are necrocentric, because death, not life, is what connects the photographed people with each other (Kheel, 1995). A former head of the IDF's Behavioural Sciences department remarked: 'Death is not addressed directly, but differently, in a rather alienating way' (Kol Ha'ir, 5 October 2001). Alienation or dehumanization enables smiles, that overtake gestures of shock, nausea, or horror.

The authority integral to oppressive-colonialist activity requires visibility that complements the demonstration of its power; it sutures authority to power and makes that association 'natural' (Mirzoeff, 2011). It is not coincidental that photographs were taken against the backdrop of suffering and humiliation of minority groups or oppressed groups. British colonialists perceived 'the natives' as a sort of wild creatures who must be subdued and controlled, and gestures of mastery/subordination are a regular motif in photographs showing conquerors and natives together (Ryan, 1997). For over a century, white Americans conducted public lynchings of African-Americans, and it was the common practice to photograph smiling spectators beside the corpses. The humiliation or defeat of the 'other', the enemy particularly whose body or corpse is demonstrably trampled and humiliated re-establish the social order he threatened to assail.

In a newspaper interview, Sontag described her feelings about the Abu Ghraib photos:

Looking at these photographs, you ask yourself, how can someone grin at the sufferings and humiliation of another human being? [...] And you feel naïve for asking, since the answer is, self-evidently, People do these things to other people. [...]. They do them when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior race or religion. For the meaning of these pictures is not just that these acts were performed, but that their perpetrators apparently had no sense that there was anything wrong in what the pictures show (New York Times, 23 May 2004).

This explanation re-illuminates the focus of media on the pictures of smiling women soldiers beside corpses or torture victims. In the visual tradition of subordination and supremacy demonstrated in trophy shots, women appear as side spectators, but also as victims of the subordinating. This is common in pornographic images, where a man stands over a woman posing at his feet. Mainstream cinema too, science fiction and horror films, display bodies of objectified women resembling photographs of dead animals or human beings of an 'inferior' category. Those women are signified as evil deviants who disseminate horror and threaten the social order which is grounded on patriarchal law (Wee, 1997). Those representations were constructed in order to validate the existing social order, temporarily suspended due to their presence (Bronfen, 1992).

In this context, one can acknowledge the essential role of the state in general, which is often accountable not only for the subjugation of the detainees and to the dehumanization of political prisoners but is also responsible for placing women soldiers in marginalized positions. Butler notes that cultural artefacts such as the images presented above point to a systematic strategy the United States, not unlike Israel, have used in the prolonged 'global war on terror' (Butler, 2007); these images do not

represent only groups of Palestinians or Muslims, framing them as 'the enemy', but they also construct femininity as an implicit threat to the very concept of war.

The subverting aspect of those photographs of women soldiers, like Abergil and Harman, who take on positions of dominance in the structure of images of violence and submission, entails the transposition of the female figure from her traditional-visual role as a threatening object requiring control, to the role of the controlling subject. Those visual images are rare and unusual, and the cultural aspects they reflect are more threatening than routine images of men in control. Smiling women next to tortured corpses violate visual, emotional and political codes; the women subjects are misplaced, both in terms of the traditional roles associated with womanhood and also in terms of the visual traditions that serve these roles. Disrupting those traditions stoked the moral scandal that erupted with the reception of women soldiers' photographs: not because of the horrific sights in the background, but because the women switched their cultural role from a position of being controlled or observing the act of control, to a controlling position with the smile associated with it.

Conclusion

We have suggested here three supplementary visual readings into representations of smiles appearing against the backdrop of horrific acts. They all emphasize that private experiences always tie together with broader social and political structures (McCann & Seung-Kyung, 2013). The two first interpretations (the 'conditioned – ready smile,' and the 'social-professional smile') place at the centre an individual or a group, who use the camera and disseminate its products, while shunting everything else in the background. But, by such doing, they closely relate to the third political-moral interpretation. These are in fact photos of destruction and calamity, in which the victims were symbolically exterminated: the aggressive shots of the camera practically demolished their existence (Bourke, 2005). Those images position visual images within a field of the discourse of power, where the system of visual signifiers serves to achieve defined political objectives (Charania, 2015). In these terms, they represent visual variations of the banality of evil (Arendt, 1963).

Within that discourse, images of smiling females near tortured or dead men, may belong to a prevalent visual category in contemporary popular culture – 'female ready to fight,' represented onscreen as violent, aggressive, and powerful. They act as a valuable barometer for monitoring the ambivalence which characterizes the production, representation, and distribution of 'femininity' in our contemporary socio-cultural climate (Frederick and Andris, 2007). Natalie Zemon-Davis indicates that images which invert sexuality, such as females assuming roles traditionally seen as masculine, affecting the order and stability of society with a defined hierarchic structure, based on masculine dominance. Such images may clarify the structure by inverting it, reflecting conflicts, and serving as a social pressure valve to alleviate them. They do not undermine the basic order of society; while they may renew the system, they cannot change it fundamentally (Zemon-Davis, 1965/1975).

The interest which the images of female soldiers evoked is not related necessarily to gendered subversion by positioning women at the centre of images of power and

force generally attributed to men. They cunningly serve as a trap set by the prevalent patriarchal cultural milieu. They either present the conditioned, ready smile as an infantile reaction, or a feminine tendency to downplay, deservedly stressing situations; seek to indicate the undeserved imitation of social-professional masculine behaviours; or represent reckless deviance from humanistic political-moral values and norms.

Reading these smiling images enabled us to map and analyze the multiple dimensions of the visual and socio-cultural arrays in which they function. These kinds of visual, inter-disciplinary and contextualized interpretations are some of the fruitful outcomes imbued in a feminist visual literacy and fundamentally enabled by it.

Notes

1. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/7/15/the-scars-of-abu-ghrai>.
2. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse.
3. Retrieved from: <https://www.france24.com/en/20100819-former-idf-soldier-adds-fuel-fire-facebook-eden-abergil-fun-kill-arabs-slaughter>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Arendt, H. (1963). Eichmann in Jerusalem. *The New York Times* (Five Parts).
- Azoulay, A. (2012). *Civil imagination: A political ontology of photography*. Verso Books.
- Babad, Y. E., Alexander, I. E., Babad, E. Y., Read, P. B., Shapiro, T., Leiderman, P. H., & Harter, S. (1983). Returning the smile of the stranger: Developmental patterns and socialization factors. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 48(5), 1–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1165889>
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. Penguin.
- Bourke, J. (2005). Sexy snaps. *Index on Censorship*, 34(1), 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03064220512331339454>
- Breaking the Silence Annual Report. (2009). *Testimonies of female soldiers on the service in the West Bank* (Hebrew).
- Bronfen, E. (1992). Over her dead body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic. Manchester University Press.
- Brower, M. (2005, December). Trophy shots: Early North American photographs of nonhuman animals and the display of masculine prowess. *Society & Animals*, 13(1), 13–31. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568530053966661>
- Butler, J. (2007, April). Torture and the ethics of photography. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25(6), 951–966. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d2506jb>
- Carson, F. (2016). *Feminist visual culture*. Routledge.
- Carrington, C. (1965). *Soldiers from the wars returning*. Hutchinson.
- Charania, M. (2015). *Will the real Pakistani woman please stand up?: Empire, visual culture, and the brown female body*. McFarland.
- Cornish, P. (2009). Just a boyish habit...? British and Commonwealth war trophies in the First World War. In N. J. Saunders & P. Cornish (Eds.), *Contested objects: Material memories of the Great War* (pp. 1–26). Routledge.
- Dickens, C. (1839). *Nicholas nickleby*. Chapman & Hall.

- Duchenne de Boulogne, G. B. (1990). *The mechanism of human facial expression*. Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1862)
- Edwards, J. L. (2012). Visual literacy and visual politics: Photojournalism and the 2004 presidential debates. *Communication Quarterly*, 60(5), 681–697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.725000>
- Ekman, P. (2007). *Emotions revealed*. Henry Holt.
- Flynt, S. L. (2009, Spring). Don't smile for the camera: Expression in early photography. *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 37(1), 3–12.
- Fransecky, B., & Debes, J. L. (1969). *Visual literacy: A way to learn – a way to teach*. Association for Educational Communication and Technology.
- Frederick, U., & Andris, S. (2007). *Women willing to fight: The fighting woman in film*. Scholars Publishing.
- Frosh, P. (2019). *The poetics of digital media*. Polity Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1977). In a different voice: Women's conceptions of self and of morality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47(4), 481–517. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.47.4.g6167429416hg5l0>
- Gourevitch, P., & Morris, E. (2008). *The ballad of Abu Ghraib*. Penguin.
- Hall, J. (1984). *Nonverbal sex differences: Communication accuracy and expressive style*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hall, J. A., & Halberstadt, A. G. (1986). Smiling and gazing. In J. S. Hyde & M. C. Linn (Eds.), *The psychology of gender: Advances through meta-analysis* (pp. 136–185). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kalof, L., & Fitzgerald, A. (2003). Reading the trophy: Exploring the display of dead animals in hunting magazines. *Visual Studies*, 18(2), 112–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860310001631985>
- Kheel, M. (1995). License to kill: An ecofeminist critique of hunters. In H. Eaton, C. Adams, & J. Donovan (Eds.), *Animals & women: Feminist theoretical explanations* (pp. 85–125). Duke University Press.
- Kotchemidova, C. (2005a). From good cheer to “drive-by-smiling”: A social history of cheerfulness. *Journal of Social History*, 39(1), 5–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2005.0108>
- Kotchemidova, C. (2005b). Why we Say “Cheese”: Producing the smile in snapshot photography. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(1), 2–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318042000331853>
- LaFrance, M., Hecht, M. A., & Levy-Paluck, E. (2003). The contingent smile: A meta-analysis of sex differences in smiling. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(2), 305–334. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.2.305>
- McCann, C., & Seung-Kyung, K. (2013). *Feminist theory reader: Local and global perspectives*. Routledge.
- Melville, H. (1949). *Pierre: Or the ambiguities*. Hendricks House. (Original work published 1852)
- Messaris, P. (1994). *Visual literacy: Image, mind & reality*. Westview Press.
- Messaris, P. (1998). Visual aspects of media literacy. *Journal of Communication*, 48 (1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1998.tb02738.x>
- Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The right to look: A counter-history of visibility*. Duke University Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). *What do pictures want?* University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2011). *Cloning war: The war of images 9/11 to the present*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press.
- Rushdy, A. (2000). Exquisite corpse. *Tradition*, 83, 70–77.
- Ryan, J. R. (1997). *Picturing empire: Photography and the visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago University Press.
- Sander, D., & Scherer, K. R. (Eds.). (2009). *The Oxford companion to emotion and the affective sciences*. Oxford University Press.

- Scharlemann, J. P. W., Eckel, C. C., Kacelnik, A., & Wilson, R. K. (2001). The value of a smile: Game theory with a human face. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 22(5), 617–640. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870\(01\)00059-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870(01)00059-9)
- Schroeder, F. E. H. (1998). Say cheese! The revolution in the aesthetics of smiles. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 32(2), 103–145. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1998.00103.x>
- Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. Picador.
- Trumble, A. (2004). *A brief history of the smile*. Basic Books.
- Wee, V.S. (1997). Observations on death, (beautiful) women and representation in Blade Runner: The most poetic subject in the world. *Kinema*, 57–71.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (2007). *The Lucifer effect: Understanding how good people turn evil*. Random House.
- Zemon-Davis, N. (1975). *Women on top*. In *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford University Press. (Original work published in 1965)

Movies

- Kennedy, R. (Director). (2007). *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. HBO Documentaries.
- Morris, E. (Director). (2008). *Standard operating procedure*. Participant Media.
- Yarom, T. (Director). (2007). *To see if I'm smiling*. Yarom Productions.