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Richard Dienst

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became an unassimilable detail exposing the falsity of the whole. With 'reality' breaking out of its embedded bed and running over the bayous of protocol, TV suddenly achieved a critical power, albeit by accident. The rhetoric of immediacy, so cherished for its ability to suppress political understanding and anger, for a brief instant lived up to its promise, exposing the violence and brutality of the State in a manner quite beyond the call of duty.

Others have identified the aftermath of the hurricane as the moment in which the Matrix of consensual, Republican-led US reality broke down to expose a large swathe of the US's expanding 'desert of the real'. With Smith's violent reversal of 'perspective', chatshow host Geraldo Rivera's ambulance-chasing but unfeigned outrage later in the same broadcast, and rapper Kanye West's impromptu denunciation of Bush's racism on an NBC charity fundraiser, the primetime heart of the Matrix itself – rather than the blogs and chatrooms, perhaps – was the site where that desert became most disturbingly visible.

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## Catastrophe and Metonymy

**Richard Dienst**

After the hurricane Katrina disaster last August and September, editorialists in the US were quick to point out the link between the Bush Administration's failure to plan for a disaster on the Gulf Coast and their failed policy in Iraq. If only the American public could see images of devastation from Iraq as vivid as those from Louisiana (some pundits said) the popular backlash against the Administration would become comprehensive and irreversible. Many would say that there aren't enough images, or the right kind of images, coming from the war in Iraq. Somewhere between the vast display of 'shock and awe' and the first-person-shooter Marine Corps videotapes from Fallujah, the daily ration of images seems unreliable or unenlightening about the course of the war, no doubt due to the embedded complicities and layers of censorship through which mainstream media coverage must travel. That is why the Abu Ghraib photos struck such a nerve: although they seemed to come from nowhere (via *The New Yorker* and CBS News), they quickly became icons, not only of American military brutality, but of truth itself, too long hidden. Before the advent of Cindy Sheehan, the appearance of those torture photos had been the only lasting disturbance in the tightly managed presentation of Operation Iraqi Freedom. If the insurgency is counting on roadside bombs, suicide attacks and kidnapped contractors to make an impression upon the emotions of American television viewers, they have another thing coming. On the homefront most of the time, nothing much seems to depend upon images from Iraq, neither the Administration's marketing strategy nor the

antiwar consciousness-raising campaign. The war is always *there* without really coming into view *here*.

And yet in the days after the Katrina disaster, it took only a further moment's thought to see that the images of the wrecked cities and wretched refugees *were* indeed images of this war. Images of the flooded streets of the Ninth Ward didn't merely resemble the blasted cinderblocks of Sadr City: the resemblance itself argued that Katrina was a calculable disaster, the result of systematic malign neglect. Footage of stranded crowds at the Superdome didn't just recall the Iraqi civilians bombed out of their houses; those crowds denounced, with their own defiant gestures, the human cost of the 'war on terror' at home and abroad. It wasn't hard to see the inhabitants of New Orleans as combatants and casualties. One photo on the front page of the *New York Times* (September 2) spoke volumes: seen from above, an African-American woman, stranded on a highway overpass, pours a bottle of water into a dish for her dog, while a plastic-wrapped corpse floats on the water below. It is an image of desultory death and routine hopelessness, and for all of its resonance in racist America, it could have come from any corner of the Empire. In moments like these, the totality and the singularity of contemporary political cruelty become visible all at once.

There are advantages and disadvantages to seeing the Iraq war like this, within a metonymic web of man-made catastrophes. Let's begin with the disadvantages. It is true that the events in Louisiana seemed to provide more conspicuous visual proof of the Bush Administration's failure than anything coming from overseas. The slow and stumbling relief efforts, the FEMA cronyism, the primetime display of presidential resolve – the sheer incompetence and corruption of it all – do indeed spring from the same crew that gave us Halliburton and the neocon cabal. But to piggyback outrage about Katrina onto opposition to the war runs the risk of mixing up different causes and distinct remedies. Critique becomes a complaint about the management style and the stagecraft of the White House. Such a position ends up as an appeal to a better American superego: our generals ought to plan their wars more effectively, our soldiers ought to treat 'enemy combatants' more humanely, and our engineers ought to fix aged infrastructure more efficiently. The Administration itself practices its own kind of displacement all the time (see the 'photo essays' on the White House website), swapping a feel-good image on the Gulf Coast or a photo-opportunity with Bono for another day's bloodshed in Baghdad. As long as political passions are channelled into a nonstop shell-game of 'good news' and 'bad news', opposition to the war will be reduced to the vain and passive wish that good news will prevail someday. Yet it's crucial to remember that this game can seem decisive only within the confines of the US media system, and not always there.

But it remains true that we do not know where to look for meaningful and useful images of the war. The Katrina connection has provided a clue. We need not confine our view to images coming from Iraq. The real spectacle of war is bigger than that, maybe everywhere and always elsewhere. Any effort

to bring the adventure in Mesopotamia too fully into focus would miss what is most historically significant about it. That is because, of course, the war in Iraq is part of a much broader offensive launched by the US government. Yes, everybody knows that, thinking of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Syria. Images from those battlefields are always getting mixed up with the dispatches from Iraq. But, as we have also known all along, the war in Iraq is part of a global economic strategy that requires the newly liberated country to be remade along neo-liberal lines. Some members of the press have reported this process in great detail, from the outsourcing of services for the US military to the privatization of Iraqi resources and enterprises 'for the benefit of the Iraqi people'. (See, for example, Harriman, 2005.) Tens of billions of dollars have already been spent, stolen and squandered in the name of 'reconstruction', without producing anything like a sustainable national economy (assuming that was the point in the first place). (See most recently, 'Iraq is "Facing Shortfall in Reconstruction"', *Financial Times*, 19 October 2005.)

How can such realities be rendered in visual terms? Does 'visual culture' have anything to teach us about the political task ahead? While the military side of the war, as we've seen, lends itself to various kinds of imaginary reconfigurations, the economic dimension remains opaque, all but unrepresentable as such. In this light, rather than reining in the metonymic urge, we should unloose it. Just as the images of Katrina refugees could throw light on the killing of civilians in Iraq, so we should assemble images of imperial hubris, financial chicanery, client-state corruption, thuggery and despair, everyday oppression and extraordinary resilience, willful distraction and disconnectedness, each one captioned 'this is Iraq', 'this is Iraq', 'this is Iraq', until it becomes apparent that the war in Iraq was always here, always somehow visible all along. It is not enough to look for the war on terror from somewhere behind the blinds of a public sphere mobilized by fear and infused by forgetfulness. It is necessary to look for the war wherever it has already taken on the face of business as usual, incorporated into the current disposition of capitalism. And in order to know how and why to oppose the war, we will need to look at it all over again.

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