

CHAPTER FIVE

Faces of the Enemy: Taliban Fighters in a Photography Studio

In the photographic album of the 9/11 catastrophe, panoramic images of the twin towers' destruction might have captured the horror of the event, but it was the ordinary snapshots and the portraits of the missing that personalized the disaster. Hastily affixed to papers and made into posters that were plastered on walls all over New York City, pictures of their faces – showing the smiling and relaxed countenances of daily life – have evoked in viewers tremendous sympathy, respect, and even a sense of grief. When these missing people were confirmed dead, their snapshots and portraits were featured in the “Portraits of Grief” series in the *New York Times*, converting private keepsakes into heavily publicized memorial images.¹¹⁵

The object of this final chapter, a collection of studio photographs of Taliban members reprinted in a book, has followed the same trajectory, traveling from the private realm to a wider public viewing. Published in 2003 by Trolley, the London-based publisher of photography and art books, *Taliban* is a compilation of 49 colored private pictures taken by Afghan photographers in Kandahar and discovered by Thomas Dworzak, a German photographer from the international agency Magnum Photos (see figure 5.1).

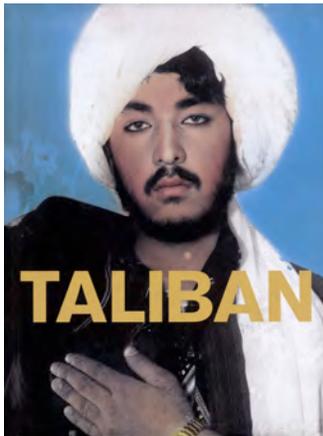


Figure 5.1. The book cover of *Taliban*, which uses one of the hand-colored photographs from the collection. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

¹¹⁵ These profiles of 9/11 victims first appeared in *The New York Times* but were later reprinted in a book entitled *Portraits: 9/11/01: The Collected “Portraits of Grief” from The New York Times*; the series is now an interactive archive at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/us/sept-11-reckoning/portraits-of-grief.html>, accessed April 20, 2013.

Amongst this collection of reprints are also snapshots and portraits, but they deviate from the “Portraits of Grief” photographs in terms of their aesthetics, politics, intended audience, instrumentalization, and affect. More poignantly, they are the faces of the enemy in the war on terror and not the victims of a catastrophe; they are images of “them” and not of “us” should one uphold that divide. As such, these photographs’ insertion into the post-9/11 visual realm occasions visual antagonism that dovetails with this dissertation’s central theme of artistic interventions into the controlling of the perceptible and the sensible. Affirming once again the aesthetic dimension of the political, this final chapter inquires into this visual engagement and signals its oppositional features by examining these Taliban photographs through their content, the modes of visibility they facilitate, and finally, their efficacy. This line of inquiry leads the chapter to return to Butler’s theoretical considerations of wartime visibility and ethical responses, as well as Rancière’s thoughts on the politics of aesthetics and critical art. Whilst the relevant works of both were broadly outlined in the introduction to the dissertation, their specific writings on photography – seen through the lenses of grief for Butler and dissensus for Rancière – will be explored in this chapter and juxtaposed with one another. Together they will address the intricate relationship between the image and the viewer.

On account of the two vastly different styles of the *Taliban* images (informal snapshots and more elaborate portraits), this chapter pursues several diverging but nevertheless interrelated lines of inquiry, with the first two sections addressing the background of the collection and the photographs’ status as counter images that contest other common visualizations of the Taliban as terrorist-enemy. The latter of the two concentrates on the snapshots and the studio photography genre which jointly challenge the Taliban’s established militant identity and masculinity. The ensuing two sections focus closely on the formal portraits. This transitions to the issue of the images’ political effects with the help of Butler’s thoughts on the ethics of photography, which encourages a compassionate visibility that would approach these Taliban faces through principles of precarity and grievability. Finally, this issue of efficacy is problematized in the last section with Rancière’s aesthetic dissensus, which in contrast encourages a viewing of the Taliban that actually obfuscates legibility and disrupts meaning, thus keeping ethics at bay. I suggest how this dissensual visibility may serve as yet another form of visual resistance against the broader post-9/11 visual realm.

Finding The Taliban, Serendipitously

According to Dworzak's short introduction to the collection, he chanced upon these photographs while covering the region in 2001 as a Western press photographer.¹¹⁶ Traveling with the Northern Alliance forces, he arrived in Kandahar in the end of December 2001 and saw outside his hotel various photography studios that were reopening after being shut down during the Taliban reign. Under Taliban rule, these studios were only allowed to take photographs for identification purposes, such as for passports, but occasionally, Taliban followers would request to pose for portraits secretly which could then be retouched and decorated by the photographer. The Taliban's pugnacious attitudes towards representation and idolatry had attracted tremendous global publicity already in 2001 with their destruction of the monumental rock-cut giant Buddhas at Bamiyan. At stake is Islam's ban on *tasweer*, or image-making, which is closely associated with *shirk*, the act of honoring and associating another with Allah, or polytheism. According to Islamic scholar Ahmad Kutty, photography used as a form of communication or for capturing memories without the overtone of *shirk* is not included in the category of forbidden *tasweer*.¹¹⁷ The Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam, though, does prohibit photography or any depiction of living beings. This is illustrated with four photographs Dworzak had placed at the beginning of the book: photographic faces of female models on hair-care bottles are scribbled over; graphic drawings of a man and an animal on street signs are daubed over with paint.¹¹⁸ It is, no doubt, this extreme stance of the Taliban towards photography that enhanced these photographs' forbidden status and their sitters' dissenting attitude. Dworzak was told that these photographs of the Taliban were taken in early November of 2001, and the sitters did not return to pick them up since they were forced to flee ahead of opposition forces.

¹¹⁶ According to his biography posted on Magnum's website, Dworzak covered the war in the former Yugoslavia, as well as conflicts in Chechnya. His photography assignments have also taken him to Iraq, Iran and Haiti. His full biography and portfolio are available at http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=MAGO31_9_VForm&ERID=24KL5359SL, accessed April 30, 2013.

¹¹⁷ Kutty's comments came in the form of a *fatwa*, see <http://www.islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/photography-allowed-islam-especially-it-not-same-painting-or-recreating-being-its-capturing-im>, accessed April 13, 2013.

¹¹⁸ In a video featuring these Taliban photographs, the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid describes the extent of this ban: "The Taliban would actually destroy any figure and that meant human figure, animal figure, any figure which they said were created by God and therefore could not be depicted. Now this led to some bizarre things like, for example, if you had a mannequin in the shop you would have to chop its head off ... or going into Kabul museum chopping off faces of statues which were 5,000 years old. So you go into Kabul museum and you see all these incredible old statues with their heads chopped off and that is pretty depressing." The video can be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHS2LUssA_U&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PLB6BE265DD04599E7XXXXXX, accessed on April 30, 2013.

In the book, these Taliban photographs are arranged in two clusters. One set is the large and more expensive black and white head-and-shoulder portraits taken and developed in the studio. They were then retouched and colorized (see figure 5.1). The other set consists of reprints from color negatives. These photographs were taken in the studio but were developed at one-hour photograph shops in neighboring Pakistan and sent back to Kandahar for retouching (see figures 5.2 and 5.3), according to Dworzak’s introduction (no page number available).



Figures 5.2 and 5.3. Examples of reprints from color negatives from the *Taliban* collection. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

In general, most of the photographs are well lit and focused, with the exception of a few slightly blurry ones. There are no photographs of women. Overall, these images, as they appear in the book, all share similar cropping. Dworzak gives no indication as to whether the photographs are organized chronologically, or alphabetized by the names of subjects, of photographers, or by studios.¹¹⁹ The sequencing of the photographs merely consists of a cluster of the colorized images, followed by a few reprints of color negatives. This pattern is then repeated several times. There are no page numbers and no captions. All the sitters remain unnamed. Publicity from this book has also led to copies of these images being circulated online as separate and free-standing images at depositories such as Google and Magnum Photos’ own databank.¹²⁰ By entitling the collection *Taliban* – the word itself foregrounded on the book’s

¹¹⁹ Despite an initial willingness to answer my questions, Dworzak never responded again to my multiple emails in which I pose this and other questions.

¹²⁰ As another sign of these photographs’ global circulation and monetary value, Magnum Photos refused to release these photographs for reprint in this dissertation for free. I had to pay its Dutch agent Hollandse Hoogte a reprint fee. After some haggling on my part, they charged me a “reduced” student price of €367. I would like to thank the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis for providing the fund for this cost.

cover in a mustard-yellow color and standing out boldly against the figure clad in black and white, and a bright blue background (see figure 5.1) – Dworzak has established visual, narrative, perceptual, and epistemological boundaries for these images through an identity; not just any identity but one that has gained great cachet as one of the enemies of the West in the war on terror.¹²¹

The Taliban were, of course, not the primary post-9/11 enemy.¹²² It was their status as al-Qaeda’s ally, as the former provider of safe haven to bin Laden and al-Qaeda members, and as hosts of terrorist training camps, that they became the visual surrogate enemy for the infinitely more elusive bin Laden and his global terrorist network at that time. While bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders could not be easily located then, the Taliban could be fixed and pinned down geographically. They were then and remain now enemies that come with a location and a battlefield. Rather than the dispersed, “invisible enemy” or the “unknown terrorist,” the Taliban are actually very accessible visually and could be rendered static. This visualization cleaves to a specific visual body (soldier)-space (battlefield)-activity (war) dynamic that becomes a semiotic cue that is significant, even more so because of the vexing absence of a similar body-space configuration for bin Laden and al-Qaeda at the time. This can be seen by considering some of the most conventional depictions of the Taliban through war photojournalism, the primary genre through which the Taliban have been represented in the Western media via mainstream television news, newspaper photographs, YouTube videos and online image archives, such as those from *The New York Times*, *Associated Press*, Getty Images, and Google.

The most common image shows Taliban fighters against a vista of the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan raising their weapons – AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers – skyward. The battlefield is the rugged mountain peaks and perilous terrains, with its infamous

¹²¹ No doubt the question remains whether these sitters are really Taliban soldiers. But the primary goal of my research is not to verify the identity, original intent, setting, or circumstances behind these photographs, thus posing a “truth” against Dworzak’s own framing. This chapter is not an exercise in investigative journalism to search and establish more “accurate” information about these photographs and the sitters themselves. Instead, the chapter is more interested in how these men now circulate and exist as “the Taliban” in these images’ global afterlife.

¹²² Given that bin Laden was the primary enemy of the war on terror, media representations of bin Laden are also vital, but that discussion falls outside this study which concentrates on the Taliban. For writings on the media representation of bin Laden see, for example, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai’s “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20.3 (2002): 117-48; and Brigitte Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna’s *Fuelling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield 2007).

“holes” and “caves” envisioned by George W. Bush as the hideouts for terrorists.¹²³ It is this sweeping landscape that serves as the common backdrop. Other kinds of images, yielded when using the keyword “Taliban” on online image databanks, do not actually contain the Taliban themselves but the impact of their guerrilla-warfare tactics: these photographs show soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) preparing for attacks against them, or on routine patrols looking for them. There are also photographs of scenes of carnage caused by Taliban suicide attacks. One other hallmark of their global visibility is reflective of the repressive nature of the group. Often criticized for their draconian measures circumscribing public life and their oppression of women, the Taliban are also visualized through this well-established framework. Images abound showing members of the Taliban religious police beating women or performing public executions of women. Available too, are post-Operation Enduring Freedom photographs depicting the return of mundane activities that were once banned under the Taliban regime, such as the re-appearance of rock bands and cock fighting.¹²⁴ All these reinforce the infamously extreme ideology of the fundamentalist group.

Seen in relation to these popular visualizations and perceptions of the Taliban enemy, the studio portrayals of the sitters in Dworzak’s collection deviate a great deal from this wartime framework. But this might be exactly the reason behind the collection’s name, for it capitalizes strategically on a visual juxtaposition between an expected warfare imagery and an aesthetics of the everyday. While these studio photographs might have originally been intended for personal keepsake, they now have a global afterlife, thanks to Dworzak, as part of the visual regime of war photographs characterizing the Taliban, even as they simultaneously challenge and counter those exact images. Dworzak’s emphasis on the photography ban essentially positions these images as alternative images, not only in terms of their aesthetics but also in terms of a resistance spirit embodied by the sitters themselves that undermines the Taliban regime itself.

Revisualizing The Taliban

In Dworzak’s collection, a change in aesthetics is prompted by a shift in photography genre from war photography to studio photography, a transition that produces counter images that initiate a revisualization of the Taliban enemy. In contrast to photojournalism’s documentary and realist

¹²³ Visualizations of the Taliban no doubt have evolved as the war in Afghanistan progresses through different stages. In this chapter, I am thinking specifically about their depictions at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001.

¹²⁴ Here I am referring to images I found at Getty Images (www.gettyimages.com) by using their search engine with the keyword “Taliban.”

mode, studio photography emphasizes pretense, performance, and idealization. With the help of backdrops, costumes, and props, the studio is a place of posing and make-believe, constructing images that often contain no direct link to reality but, instead, to desires and fantasies.

What is notably different about these Taliban photographs is the absence of that all-important visual reference of the expansive Afghan landscape and the spectacular battlefield. Instead, what one sees are various forms of fake backdrops: one containing a large and encompassing poster, effectively allowing the poster to serve as a totalizing backdrop (see figure 5.4), or a background consisting of smaller and multiple posters (see figure 5.5). In his introduction, Dworzak describes the setting for these photographs as the “back room of the studio” in Kandahar and no other details of the scene are offered. Whether this is a domestic space or an adjoining studio space is unclear. From the photographs, what can be assessed is the possibility of several different studios due to diverse backdrops. The various posters often feature Western-style houses and Swiss chalets. These posters show scenes of idyllic and sylvan perfection, in which a stylish home, and thus family life, co-exists peacefully with nature.



Figures 5.4 and 5.5. Left photograph shows encompassing backdrop, and right photograph displays fragmented backdrop with multiple posters. Both are from the *Taliban* collection. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

Dworzak describes these backdrops as “the absurd Swiss background of weird Alpine chalets.” Rather than being “absurd” or “weird,” however, the Swiss landscape posters actually have a social history, and the usage of Swiss vistas as backdrops in images also has an aesthetic parallel.¹²⁵ The juxtaposition of the Taliban bodies and the Swiss scenes actually encourage a

¹²⁵ I would like to thank Alexandra Schneider of the University of Amsterdam for bringing to my attention the social and aesthetic background of these Swiss landscape scenes.

contrastive way of seeing Taliban bodies that contributes to these images' oppositional and dissonant status.

As part of her examination of the appearance and usage of Swiss landscapes in contemporary Bollywood films, Alexandra Schneider discusses one specific countryside poster that is the exact same one being used as the backdrop in two of the Taliban photographs (see figure 5.6 and backdrop of figure 5.7). This and other such landscape photographic posters can be purchased cheaply and easily from street vendors in India as items to decorate living room walls, according to Schneider.



Figure 5.6. An example of a popular composite poster featuring a countryside scene. Posters such as this are used as backdrops in some of the photographs in the *Taliban* collection. See below. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Schneider.



Figure 5.7. A photograph from the *Taliban* collection showing two boys posing with what appears to be fake guns in front of the exact same countryside poster in figure 5.6. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

This specific poster image of a villa is actually a composite image, a collage made by culling different components from different images. More importantly, the image depicts, as she argues, “an imaginary fantasy of a home, rather than a picture of any existing place” (90). Schneider’s study of Bollywood films, which have Indian actors performing their song-and-dance scenes also against backgrounds of Swiss sceneries, can serve as a visual parallel. Although her findings are situated in the Indian cinematic context, there are aesthetic similarities. In her cases, the juxtaposition is between various aspects: Indian and Western, traditional,

national and subaltern, sacred and erotic, all on a single receptor surface. The Swiss sceneries become an imaginary space for the leading characters' inner/interior life in that they project their dreams onto locations. In these Taliban photographs, the sitters, too, are situated in a scene of imagination and fantasy, creating their own illusionary and fictionalized selves.

Consider another related parallel: in her study of the transmutation of private images in urban India, Nancy Adajania explores digitally manipulated images which contain the original portraits of sitters but with inserted pictorial elements like famous tourist landscapes or other suggestive backdrops. This technique produces digitally manipulated composite images that not only underscore the social play of fantasy but also reveal tellingly the desires and aspirations of the sitters.¹²⁶ Their incongruous quality is prominent in cases when the original headshots or the full-body shots are positioned disproportionately to the added templates as in, for example, when the heads of a honeymoon couple are positioned towering over the Sydney Opera House. Such incongruity is prominent but also irrelevant. These added pictorial elements reflect and affirm the sitter's own imaginary self. These elements, however jarring, become visual props or referents that may point to one's desired identities and lifestyles (89-98).

It is unclear whether the Taliban sitters were able to choose their own backdrop, but both Schneider's and Adajania's arguments can be applied to reconfigure their wartime bodies and enemy identity. To consider the relationship between the Taliban body and the backdrop as a projection space for their dreams, or as a creation of a longed-for imaginary self-identity, would put their bodies, usually linked to combat, in an alternative mode of yearning. Moving beyond Dworzak's framework of Taliban fighters challenging the representational ban, these images do not just show a desire to be photographed, but also a desire to fashion one's self and identity, whether imaginary or aspired. Note, too, the profusion of artificial flowers that appears in just about every photograph in the series with Swiss backdrops, either as a prop held by the sitters, or simply as decoration jutting into the frame and filling the foreground (see previous figures 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.8 next page).

¹²⁶ Unfortunately I was unable to secure these images for reprint in the dissertation.



Figure 5.8. Fake flowers are prominently featured in this image from the *Taliban* collection. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

While flowers are generally associated with women and used as conventional studio props reserved for them in the West, this male/floral combination is not an anomaly in Middle Eastern and Central Asian cultures, especially when it comes to popular visual traditions of photography studios. The floral imagery contributes to the studio's space as a dreamworld and site of fantasy, rather than possessing any gender-specific connotations.¹²⁷

If within the standard framing of the Taliban one sees those bodies at war and on the battlefield, in these Taliban photographs one sees contrary bodies in scenes of desires and desiring which require a different mode of perception from those that fix them as the terrorist enemy. Rather than being destined for the battlefield, these Taliban bodies, unencumbered by that visual cue, have wandered away from their prescribed place. That dramatic and treacherous locale of the battlefield is key, not only because it relieves the anxieties of identifying the elusive terrorist by having a geographically fixable enemy, but it is also needed to achieve a concordance between space, identity, body, and time: (violent) Taliban bodies are properly outfitted with weapons, passing their time in a state of combat and war on the battlefield. They are most often seen and perceived through these visual coordinates of war, violence, and extremism, and they are rendered visible and perceivable when they are thus visualized. These are the primary conditions of their appearance and legibility. But in Dworzak's collection, one sees that these Taliban bodies are no longer fixed geographically. Instead, they are relocated to the intimate

¹²⁷ Despite tremendous efforts, it was difficult to find extensive English-language academic works identifying contemporary photography studio practices in Afghanistan. This means I had to resort to more informal research methodology through interviews with people familiar with the region, in particular the Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, whose 2004 project entitled *Terrorist* was based on the visual traditions of old photography studios in remote villages of the Middle East. Besides stressing the gender neutrality of floral motifs, he also points to the male/flower combination in popular propaganda photographs of martyrs, for example in Iran and Lebanon, as well as in Eastern memorial images. See his series *Terrorist* and *Ready to Order* (2007-2008) on his website at <http://khosrowhassanzadeh.com/index.php>, accessed April 12, 2013.

interior of a photography studio, a setting where they further transcend spatial and temporal specificities to imaginary locations and create fictitious selves that also destabilize their identity as warring militants and enemies.

This unraveling of wartime designations continues with other features of these images. The studio relocation has displaced those bodies away from the discourse of war, violence, and extremism and also introduced a different time, one that diverges from nation time and combative time, to private and everyday time, rest time, and play time. They no longer need to attend to the business of war but to the business of posing, performing, and creating memories. These new tasks also inject new ambiguities into their identity, especially on the topic of masculinity, which also undermines the process of visualizing the Taliban.

These acts of posing and performance find their clearest expression through the Taliban sitters' interactions with firearms. Whether weapons serve as a symbol of heroism, power or even violence, the act of posing with and brandishing guns is a common practice in a photographic studio; it is often seen as a display of masculine power to reinforce ideals of manhood. This interlocking relationship between posing, guns, and masculinity as a performative act in the studio becomes a specific and literal enactment of Butler's concept of gender performativity. Butler views gender identity not as a stable and essential state of being, but rather, a forged and normalized practice through repeated performances (Loxely 112-119). As Butler famously argues in *Gender Trouble*:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140, italics in original)

Gender acts, according to Butler, are compulsively repeated because they never quite achieve the ideal that is demanded (Loxley 126). More specific to this Taliban context, the gender identity is performed right before the camera. What is being performed are the postures and stylizations of bodies according to a specific gun-wielding Taliban masculinity, which is the stock image in the common visualizations of the Taliban in Western media. But in Dworzak's collection, that Taliban body's relationship to firearm is not always so confident and assured.

This performed masculinity can be best seen in figure 5.9. Much like the conventional photographs of Taliban insurgents circulated globally in newspapers and magazines, this photograph showcases a fighter raising his rifle skyward, the position for firing off celebratory

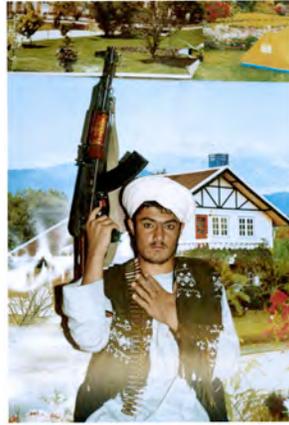


Figure 5.9. An image from the *Taliban* collection with a soldier expressing a more aggressive and militarist form of masculinity. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

shots, and not in the safer direction of downrange. His finger is on the trigger, ready to shoot; his body is accessorized with a bullet chain and he makes the formulaic hand gesture of respect and devotion. This image captures a more determined attempt to embody a specific vision of an aggressive and militarist masculinity. Other images, however, show a less resolute desire to emulate that warrior and masculine demeanor. In those images, while the men are bolstered with weapons of warfare, they do not look exactly battle-ready. Figures 5.10 and 5.11 show these men carrying their firearms more gently or placing their weapons to the side of their bodies. They grip their weapons in a more nonchalant and tentative manner rather than in an assertive and secure way. Some even hold their rifles while in a sitting position, calling attention to the studio setting and highlighting their passivity, given that the more real and authentic act of firing arms would require the prepared postures of the bladed-off stance or the athletic rifle stance. While firearms might signify power and virility, among other qualities, these few Taliban bodies holding them are not always fully immersed in their role. Their gentle handling of these rifles reveals a palpable sense of hesitation, which leads to an apprehensive performance before the camera. It is a self-reflexive moment, where the act of performing itself becomes prominent because the sitters do not confidently display the male bravado and physical aggressiveness that are usually inspired by these weapons. They are seen merely enacting the pose.



Figures 5.10 and 5.11. Photographs of Taliban followers posing with their firearms. In these frames from the *Taliban* collection, the sitters' overall gun-toting postures are more passive. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

Alternatively perhaps this association with guns can be seen through the function of the studio as a site of play, and therefore, as a potential source of pleasure. These firearms would no longer function as actual weapons for battle but studio props instead (see previous figures 5.7 and 5.8). Most of the photographs, however, do not offer evidence of such amusement. This “playing” occurs in an out-of-kilter manner. The majority of the sitters' faces are sombrous, and at times haggard, with only one or two faces displaying ease and a more natural gaze. In one photograph, a man is holding a gun that is clearly too small for his hand (see previous figure 5.8); in another, a man points the gun randomly at the nose of a fellow companion. Overall, these awkward and uneasy corporeal interactions with firearms in the *Taliban* images show a relationship to guns that is more irreverent and less decided.

Relating this to wartime photographic conceptualizations of the Taliban in which they are often portrayed as violent insurgents outfitted with weapons, here, that expected relationship between their bodies and weapons is denaturalized, feigned, and disrupted. We see in these Taliban photographs simultaneously the fortification of that dominant militant warrior posture, but also expressions of masculinity that badly mimic, contradict, or resist this stereotype. These sitters' presence and performance in the studio calls into question the Taliban's widely-circulated representation as the “Taliban.” The posing and performing of their Taliban identity in a studio becomes an analogy of their appearances before the cameras of the Western news media, which one could argue consist of similar imagining, posturing, and performing.

What these images reveal are also multiple expressions of masculinity, a notion that is hinted at by Dworzak, but one whose instrumentalization remains unclear. In his introduction to

the book, Dworzak also describes the masculinity of men from Kandahar, the city that was the former stronghold of the Taliban and the seat of power for the Pashtuns:¹²⁸ these men wear too-small colored sandals to show bulging flesh, they accent their eyes with kohl, and they stick flowers in their guns. Following the rhetoric of many typical post-9/11 depictions of the Taliban's woman-less world, Dworzak also stresses Afghan males' limited contacts with females, including a hampered visibility since women were required to wear the burka. Such gender segregation prompts same-sex affections and desires, as Dworzak seems to suggest, given that he also divulged the fact that they groped him unabashedly. As Dworzak claims in his vignette:

If I had had my balls grabbed by the soldiers (considered a neat chat-up line) in the North [of Afghanistan] maybe once a week, in Kandahar it would happen daily. Soldiers there would tickle the palms of my hands; there were furtive caresses in crowds. (parenthesis in original; *Taliban* introduction, no page number available)

These themes of masculinity and the homosocial/sexual behavior of the Kandaharis are given another inflection in the second text in Dworzak's book; this one is by Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, who discloses the tradition of pederasty among Kandahari men. Anderson goes on to say, however, that one of the first changes the Taliban initiated after they took power was to punish mujahidin commanders accused of rape and pederasty. He also underlines the Taliban's persecution of homosexuals.

That these issues of masculinity, gender separation, pederasty, and homosexuality are ambiguously and haphazardly highlighted in these essays is perhaps prompted by the homosociality in most of the photographs and two specifically affectionate images in the collection that show male couples clasping hands. These, Dworzak probably thought, required some local contextualization (see figures next page).¹²⁹ Dworzak's fragmented narrative,

¹²⁸ The Taliban movement is primarily made up of Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group.

¹²⁹ This theme of pederasty is extended with more local background in a short video featuring these Taliban photographs and interviews with Dworzak himself and Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist. According to Rashid, there is a strong homosexual tradition in the region in which "an elder man would kind of adopt a young man and become lover, become student, and teach him whatever skills he may have." When Mohammed Omar came to power in the mid-1990s, he attacked and killed a local warlord for keeping young boys as concubines, says Rashid. Although Omar banned homosexuality, these long-standing traditions in southern Afghanistan continued, albeit surreptitiously. Rashid is also the author of the well-known book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. The video featuring him and Dworzak can be viewed on YouTube via the following link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHS2LUssA_U&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PLB6BE265DD04599E7XXXXXX, accessed April 5, 2013.



Figures 5.12 and 5.13. Hand-colored photographs from the *Taliban* collection with men clasping hands. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

however, does not elucidate much. If anything, these references to the sitters’ masculinity and sexuality are especially curious since they parallel a post-9/11 popular culture landscape replete with hostile representations that construct the terrorist-enemy through the prisms of “failed” and deviant masculinity and sexuality, and homophobia. From stand-up comedians who often take on the persona of terrorists and suicide bombers, and reenact these perpetrators’ presumed sexual anxieties and frustrations, to post-9/11 posters of bin Laden being sodomized by the Empire State Building (with the caption reading “The Empire Strikes Back ... So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch?”) (qtd. in Puar, *Terrorist* 37), the typical process of enemification has pivoted on a hostile rhetoric of the enemy’s sexuality as perverse and deviant or as failed and repressed. Sexual deviancy has been linked to the process of “discerning, othering, and quarantining” terrorist bodies (Puar, *Terrorist* 38). As Patricia Owens has also reminded us, various post-9/11 constructions of Muslim sexuality have older Orientalist roots. She explains:

Muslims were represented as paedophiles, pederasts and sodomites and, later, also as somehow sexually repressed. Contemporary notions of repressed ‘Muslim’ sexuality are the reverse image of this older Orientalist construction. They take their place in a long list of European failures to account for the ambiguities of sexual practice and identity, of ethnocentric theories of sexual behaviour and sexual orientation. (1049)¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Orientalist assumptions were put into practice most disturbingly at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, where the assumed sexual attitudes of Muslim men – in view of Islam’s taboo regarding homosexuality and its emphasis on modesty and sexual privacy which allegedly make Muslim males sexually sensitive and repressed – became the framework through which torture took shape in sexual humiliations, acts that were presumably to be especially humiliating and devastating for these men. Owens has offered a detailed discussion of how long-held Orientalist notions regarding the sexual vulnerability of Muslim males became key in interrogation and torture techniques in recent US wars. See her article “Torture, Sex and Military Orientalism,” *Third World Quarterly* 31:7 (2010): 1041-

In Dworzak's collection, while his narrative framing shows the legacies of Orientalist thinking, the images themselves also exhibit such leanings. In a few images, the addition of hand-tinted colorization has warmed up the sitters' facial complexion with an apricot and coral tint. (An in-depth discussion of hand-tinted coloration will be presented in the last section of the chapter). Their noses are noticeably contoured and made more prominent. Lips are plumped up with a deeper red-orange hue. Along with their distinct kohl-lined eyes, these men are feminized in a way that contributes to a sexualization of the image.

Within local Afghan traditions, the ultimate aim of colorization may simply be the beautification of the sitter, with the coloring aesthetics universalized irrespective of the sitter's gender.¹³¹ But due to their new Western circulation, these images find themselves at the confluence of Orientalist imagination and viewing, and local aesthetics. A history of Orientalist homoerotic aesthetics weighs on these images, as their subject matter and style, in particular the close-up and more intimate photographs of male couples, resonate strikingly with traditional Orientalist imaginings of homoerotic desires and foreign otherness. Commenting on these Taliban images, Joseph A. Boone places them in a longer cultural and visual trajectory and compares them to the Orientalist homoerotic photographs from the turn of the 20th century that catered to Europeans' sexual fantasies of exoticism (576-577). As Boone argues, while the images share uncanny similarities (poses, hand-tinted coloration and props, among others) there is also a major difference in that these Taliban recruits were not consciously posing for homophilic viewers in search of Orientalist thrills (597).

Orientalist staging and local practice, however, were enacted once more when Dworzak added a photograph of himself at the end of the book staged in the style of these Taliban colorized portraits. Not only are his black hair and beard intensified, his facial expression is just as solemn as the Taliban sitters. His cheeks and lips have been given a slight wash of color. The backdrop has a similar vibrant blue hue, accented with a yellow halo-like circle of light. It is anyone's guess whether this mimicked image is a form of Orientalist fantasy, an act of admiration or mockery for painted photography aesthetics, a commentary on the fictional

1056.

¹³¹ This last point is suggested by Hassanzadeh after viewing these Taliban photographs; he argues that the aim of hand-coloration for studio photographs seeks to beautify the sitter, and the techniques themselves may not be gender specific, resulting, indeed, in faces that seem more feminine, but only in the sense that the faces are made-up.

construct of Taliban representations in general or an observation on the verity of the medium of photography.¹³²

Even though Dworzak's narrative framework follows Orientalist and popular culture imaginations, it is less certain how those assumptions are mobilized. By mentioning the persecution of homosexuals and by placing the affectionate photograph between the two men right at the front of the book, Dworzak seems to invite viewers to read these images as acts of opposition against repressive Taliban authorities. Of course two men holding hands might suggest same-sex affections and desires, but not necessarily a homosexual identity in the ways of Western identity politics. This same-sex relationship nevertheless seems to be viewed as a laudatory act of defiance rather than part of the common hostile discourse and imagination to vilify the enemy. Western progressive sexual attitudes seem to be pitted against or put to service denouncing the Taliban's repressiveness and disallowance.

I would argue, however, that despite Dworzak's own ambivalent narrative framing, these studio photographs reveal multiple visual expressions of Afghan masculinity and homo-social/sexual attitudes that disrupt both mainstream media's portrayals of Taliban militants and popular culture's hostile and homophobic depictions of the post-9/11 enemy. They serve as counter images not because they posit a "gay" Taliban follower against a militant one or because they express a dissident, progressive, pro-homosexuality attitude and liberation against homophobia and intolerance, but because the images account for and affirm instead the diversity of homo-social/sexual relations in different cultures. Rather than seeing their homosociability as a result of absent female encounters, repressed or failed heterosexual growth, it is seen through the multiplicity of masculinities and social and sexual practices within Muslim men.

In sum, whatever sense of familiarity one brings to view these *Taliban* photographs based on dominant images, may actually result in non-recognition as the images subvert previous visual encounters with the Taliban. In the photography studio, their militant and enemy status becomes so undermined that a role reversal to victims can even be imagined. Although as violent militants they spark alarm and calls for their extermination through the global war on terror, these photographs seem to evoke very different sentiments. If one were to see these photographs along with the globally circulated images of Western forces in Afghanistan, the contrast is glaring. Compared to the bulging ISAF soldiers who are almost twice their real size thanks to

¹³² Dworzak's mimicked image also raises the possibility that the collection is a hoax, although this is very unlikely since these images are being advertised and sold by the internationally well-established Magnum Photos.

their bulletproof vests, these Taliban fighters become smaller in their physical frame. These Taliban do not don any protective helmets, neither do they carry any high-tech military gadgets. Looking at these photographs through the ten-year chasm of time and with the retrospective knowledge of Operation Enduring Freedom, it is a sense of corporal vulnerability and precarity that actually marks these Taliban insurgents rather than masculine power. It is their injurability at the receiving end of asymmetrical US military violence that is pronounced.

In the *Taliban* introduction Dworzak explains that most of these photographs, according to the Afghan photographers, were taken in early November 2001. These fighters, however, did not return to pick them up since they were forced to flee ahead of the post-9/11 retaliatory military campaign. The studios were willing to part with these photographs, since as one photographer was quoted saying to Dworzak: “Most of them are dead anyway,” (*Taliban* introduction, no page number available). If that is indeed the case, we are looking at images of the deceased. Are they among those invisible Afghan people, relegated to the sidelines of 9/11 history, who died as part of Operation Enduring Freedom by serving as “collateral damage” in the global war on terror? And as such, are they also the “ungrievable lives” that Butler has impelled us to mourn?¹³³ This possibility of a drastically altered emotional engagement with these pictures will be explored in the next section in which the oppositional potential of the collection will be located in the viewing process.

An Ethical Visual Intervention?

That a photographic collection of one’s enemy would raise a concern for these adversaries’ physical vulnerability and grievability is no doubt influenced by Butler’s post-9/11 writings on violence and mourning, some of which were introduced in this dissertation’s introduction. In her consideration of a non-violent ethics (*Precarious* xvii), Butler examines the Levinasian model that is based on an acknowledgment of the precariousness of life, beginning with the precarious life of the Other. Levinas’s notion of the “face” – the site of the Other’s precarity – is also a scene that makes moral demands on us and requires an ethical response.¹³⁴ Already this basic premise of mourning and grieving for one’s enemy seems an oppositional intervention into general proclamations of extermination and eradication of the Taliban. Butler, though, has related this grievability of the Other to the broader post-9/11 wartime visual culture and the role

¹³³ See chapter two of Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

¹³⁴ For Butler’s consideration of Levinas’s thoughts, see chapter five of *Precarious Life*.

of photography itself. This section first outlines her ideas and then suggests how her notions might offer a different way of seeing these Taliban photographs that intervenes into the existing sensible field through a compassionate engagement, rather than an antagonistic one, with the enemy.

As I have already summarized in my introduction, Butler's post-9/11 concerns evolve around the unequal distribution of recognition of the human and grievability, in particular for victims of the war on terror. In times of war, such practices of acknowledgement and respect for the precarity of life become infinitely more difficult. In *Frames of War* Butler identifies the obstacles, paying special attention to the act of framing – the structuring of the field of perceptible reality – and also to the frame of the photograph. In this way, her approach to photography is very much situated against a broader context of war, addressing issues such as the effacement of war victims and the dead in the American media, and the photographic representation of the precarious state of those at the mercy of American military violence. For Butler, framing is an “unmarked” act of delimitating the field itself, with certain contents and perspectives shown, while simultaneously excluding something else that is never shown and rendered impermissible to be shown (*Frames* 73). Butler is ever alert to those frames that establish the field of perception as dictated by the US military and are accepted and confirmed by the news media. As an illustration, Butler analyzes the practice of “embedded reporting” in post-9/11 American wars that complies with the military's mandating of a specific visual perspective, which in turn, she claims, structures the public's apprehension of the war (*Frames* 66).

But what preoccupies Butler is not merely that something is being seen and something remains unseen, but equally importantly, how such framing represents war-related suffering, and how that presentation would lead or fail to lead to certain kinds of affect and evoke certain forms of ethical response towards what one sees. She argues: “... whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established” (*Frames* 64). In this way, Butler is concerned with the frame itself but also with what that frame determines: who will and will not be accorded the status of the human and be grieved or ungrieved, prompting a response of sympathy and compassion or disavowal and a non-ethical response. For Butler, the post-9/11 war-induced visual regime is one that is structured by mechanisms of restrictions, including elisions and state-directed frames, which have worked to undermine both “a sensate understanding of the war, and the conditions for a sensate opposition to war” (*Frames*

100).

The photographic frame becomes pertinent here as part of the mechanism of visual restrictions through images that foreclose responsiveness, or as an oppositional practice by providing alternative frames. This oppositional and interventionist role would be achieved through its function of documentary and evidentiary imaging, which in times of war has often been bolstered with an ethical imperative to capture the precarity, suffering, and destruction of victims, which might facilitate compassion and even initiate anti-war actions. It is called upon to play a critical role through its (much disputed) potential of awakening social conscience.¹³⁵

One of the most prominent commentators on such a responsibility for photography is Susan Sontag, and it is via an engagement with Sontag's thoughts that Butler considers such a capacity for photography in times of war – its ability to relay affect, incite and enrage, and mobilize people against war. But while that is the underlying question that Butler circles around in the chapter “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag” in *Frames of War*, it is also one that she did not answer conclusively. This intellectual engagement with Sontag, however, does end on one aspect of photography that seems to hold promise in fulfilling Butler's repeated call for the acknowledgement, recognition, and grievability of others: photography's haunting quality.¹³⁶ Reiterating Sontag's remark: “Let the atrocious images haunt us” (*Frames* 96),¹³⁷ Butler contends: “We see the photograph and cannot let go of the image that is transitively relayed to us. It brings us close to an understanding of the fragility and mortality of human life, the stakes of death in the scene of politics” (*Frames* 96).

Photography's haunting quality, as related to death and Butler's conception of grievability as the precondition of life, has much to do with the medium's unique relationship to temporality. In photography, the original moment captured by the image is in the past, in relation to the viewing of that image in the next or future moment. This relationship with both the past and future, this future of the past, is best captured by the future perfect tense in which something will already be ended or completed by a certain point in the future, and is expressed by phrases

¹³⁵ For a closer look into this photojournalism tradition which adopts the ethical imperative to bear witness and elicit compassion in viewers, see Liam Kennedy's “Framing Compassion,” *History of Photography* 36:3 (2012): 306-314, and Sharon Sliwinski's “A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography,” *Visual Studies* 19:2 (2004): 150-162.

¹³⁶ Although Sontag's thoughts are related to some of the issues raised here, this chapter is nevertheless focused on an engagement between Butler and Rancière and it does not aim to insert Sontag into this already expansive discussion on photography's capabilities. For Sontag's thoughts, see *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), and Sliwinski's “A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography” in previous footnote.

¹³⁷ The quote originally came from Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, page 65.

such as “will have done” and “will have finished.” Thus from the vantage point of a time in the future, the past will have occurred.

According to Butler, enabled by this future perfect, the photograph instates grievability, given the medium’s evidentiary power that documents a life having been lived or one that will have been lived (*Frames* 97). Turning to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, Butler reiterates his reflections on the 1865 photograph of Lewis Payne, which was taken ahead of that young man’s execution. Barthes had identified the two temporal modes of the image: “this will be” and “this has been.” As he famously proclaimed: “I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake” (96). Both temporal modes point to an “absolute past,” which leads Butler to ask whether this quality of the image would lead to a more explicit form of grieving. “To confirm that a life was, even within the life itself, is to underscore that a life is a grievable life” (*Frames* 97).

This acknowledgement of life is what the frames of war often fail to bestow when they exclude non-American losses, for example Afghan and Iraqi deaths, from view, thus rendering these victims faceless, unthinkable, de-realized, ungrievable, as well as their lives unlived. It is a form of radical effacement establishing that there never was a life and therefore there never was a death, says Butler (*Prekarious* 146). Marking a loss, in contrast, reflects the existence of a life, in that “someone has lived” and “someone will have lived,” pointing to a time and a loss to come. Butler argues:

... the photograph acts on us in part through outliving the life it documents; it establishes in advance the time in which that loss will be acknowledged as a loss. So the photograph is linked through its ‘tense’ to the grievability of a life, anticipating and performing that grievability. In this way, we can be haunted in advance by the suffering or death of others or we can be haunted afterwards, when the check against grief becomes undone. (*Frames* 98)

Thinking with Butler, one could argue that images which haunt with the depiction of others’ death and suffering, viewed against a post-9/11 visual culture that is keen to vilify and de-humanize terrorist-enemies and overlook Afghan and Iraqi victims, could be seen as an assertive act of resistance that intervenes by establishing lives lived and destroyed, and by facilitating grievability. This would not just be an intervention into the process of visualizing the enemy and the accompanying hostile discourse, but also an intervention into one’s sensate and emotional entanglement with the enemy.

Butler's consideration of the ethics of photography is motivated by the graphic images of torture at Abu Ghraib in particular, and war photography in general. Beyond that, she did not specify what other forms of photography might be subjected to an ethical obligation. Clearly, Dworzak's *Taliban* collection contains photography studio images that convey neither torture nor suffering. And yet, if the Afghan photographer's claim of the sitters' flight and the subsequent death of some is to be trusted, then traces of death, too, hover in these scenes.¹³⁸ Even away from the battlefield, in these ordinary moments of fantasy and posing, violence and death stalk the images.

There are also aesthetic traces that presage the calamity to come. Besides the 33 photographs with Swiss-like backdrops, 16 photographs of head-and-shoulder shots are also featured in *Taliban*. What distinguishes them is their post-processing hand-painted colorization. While the series with the Swiss backgrounds were taken with and reprinted from color negatives, these head-and-shoulder portraits were of a large and more expensive format in black and white, taken, developed, retouched and colorized in the studios in Kandahar. Dworzak did not comment any further on the process of this hand-tinted coloration, except to explain that the Taliban, desiring more than passport photographs, would ask to pose for "a more flattering portrait" which would then be retouched and decorated "as best the photographer could manage" (*Taliban* introduction, no page number available). It is unclear whether this need for hand coloration was due to an inadequate color film supply and/or the lack of technical facilities in these studios.

The artificial colors will be discussed in depth in the next section in relation to Rancière's notion of aesthetic dissensus. For now it is vital to note that these colors, applied with too heavy a hand in this case, have imparted the sitters with such an unnatural flesh tone that they appear almost inhuman; the natural flush and texture of the skin have disappeared under the veil of paint. Overpainted images often produce a sharper "hyper-reality" effect due to the heightening of facial features (Pinney 140), and these heavily made-up Taliban faces bear an artificiality that conceals their original countenance (see figure 5.1). This heavy overlay of unnatural complexion coloring has created images that might be best described as "other-worldly." Unlike the bodies from the Swiss-landscape photographs whose slightly dirty clothes and dust-covered hands suggest the daily toil of surviving in an impoverished country, these overpainted Taliban images

¹³⁸ It is difficult to confirm the deaths of these Taliban fighters and the combat circumstances under which they might have perished, whether it was at the hands of the Northern Alliance or through aerial bombings by US-led forces. Although they might or might not have been directly killed by US forces, they might still be casualties of a US-initiated military campaign.

exhibit no such worldly rootedness. They actually evoke the spirit and aesthetic of memorial images. In his discussion of Indian photographic practices, Christopher Pinney examines memorial images that are created when existing black and white images of the deceased are enlarged and hand-painted, just like these Taliban photographs, by the photographer-memorial portraitist (138).¹³⁹ This need for photograph treatment is due to a lack of color-processing or the absence of sufficiently large or isolated images of the deceased which relatives desire for keepsake. In the specific Indian context that Pinney discusses, the photographic portraiture of the dead plays a significant role after the subject's death, in particular in rituals of remembrance and worship by surviving family members (138-149).

For the Taliban, the need for memorialization can also be speculated within a broader context of armed conflicts and martyrdom. For example, the desire for memorialization is seen in Palestinian suicide bombers who would have their pictures taken or their farewell speeches videotaped before facing martyrdom. These photographs and videos are also used for future recruitment purposes. Whether this was the original intent behind these Taliban portraits is difficult to determine, but the photographs' status as martyr portraits remains a possibility, which is explored more closely in the following section. Regardless of why and how that memorial aesthetic was inspired, initiated or instrumentalized, the sequence of memorialization is subverted by the Afghan painter-photographer, in contrast to the Indian context. If the timeline provided by Dworzak is accurate, the photographer/painter/memorial portraitist had exercised the craft of painterly memorialization prehumously rather than posthumously, thus prematurely ushering the future into his present through an image from his recent past. The sitters were possibly immortalized aesthetically while still alive due to foreknowledge, prophecy or ill-will, one cannot be sure. In any case, the Afghan photographer had aesthetically announced a death to come, a time when "this will have been done," further solidifying that existing and original link between photography and death, which, for Sontag, "haunts all photographs of people" (*Photography* 64). His colorization affirmed photography's temporality of an anterior future and established in advance a time when the loss of this sitter will be acknowledged and recognized as a loss. And if such a loss can be discerned here, it also attests to a life lived and rescues it from

¹³⁹ Indian photography practices may not be exactly the same as those in Afghanistan, but despite great efforts, as I mentioned earlier, it was difficult to identify contemporary photography studio practices in Afghanistan. While accounts exist of how and why foreigners often point the camera on the Afghans after 9/11, there was a lack of academic information on how Afghans themselves engage socially with photography.

erasure. The sitter's grievability is therefore substantiated and it, in turn, invites the viewer to the task of grieving.

If Butler is correct in her assessment of a post-9/11 wartime visual regime that has prevented a sensate understanding of the war, then these Taliban photographs, as they have now been inserted into the visual field, could be seen as an assertive and direct act of resistance. They intervene by facilitating a more sensate and compassionate encounter, alerting viewers not only to the precarity of life but also solidifying that life and instating grievability. Viewing these photographs in this elegiac mode would rework one's perception of the Taliban, requiring one to see them not as enemies, terrorists or suicide bombers, but as those whose deaths must be mourned. By reconfiguring the restrictive visual frames of enemification and vilification with compassion, these death-bearing images would also displace the mourning for 9/11 victims, which was instrumentalized for patriotic sentiments and retaliatory military campaigns, to the enemy instead. Underpinned by Butler's haunting, these Taliban photographs provide an occasion to engage in this way with the enemy other by creating an ethical relation between the image and the viewing. There is now an ethical demand placed on the viewer.

Grief, though, is a demanding process that would require certain relationality – familial, close, and intimate, to suggest but a few – to the deceased. There are no names to identify these fighters and no captions to detail that moment in the studio or to intimate other aspects of their lives. Placing these caption-less Taliban photographs in the photographic chronicle of 9/11, one sees the discrepancy between the muteness of these Taliban lives and those of 9/11 victims at the World Trade Center, whose lives were eulogized by the capable writers of *The New York Times*' "Portraits of Grief." This narrative scarcity puts tremendous pressure on visibility, which must shoulder quite onerously the responsibilities of ethical persuasion. And even if abundant narratives are available to bridge the (emotional, political, cultural) chasm, the ultimate question still remains whether spectators would accept that heavy responsibility. Is Butler's haunting, then, imploring too much and too quickly? A haunting would require a straight and determinate link between the obliging image and the viewing; it would equate that desired efficacy of photography to elicit emotions with the emotional image itself. In fact, it is a winding road to travel from the grievable Taliban in the frame to the affective impact on the viewer, to the viewer's reception and recognition of that affect, to the viewer's (ethical or not) response to that demand – which would be grief in Butler's thinking – and finally, to political mobilization, should such initiation be possible and needed in the scenario.

Butler's thinking of an ethical engagement with the photograph has nevertheless led us to that problematic relationship between the image, or any artwork for that matter, and the viewing process by the viewer. While that relationship seems unpredictable and unstable, and thus might be considered as an obstacle for aesthetic resistance, this indeterminacy may still hold possibilities for critical interventions. The next and final section examines how Rancière describes that image-viewing relationship through an aesthetic rupture and how that fissure might yield implications for photography's interventionist role and for the *Taliban* collection.

A Dissensual Visuality

While Butler endeavors to ascertain the moral work of photography in wartime, Rancière's discussion of photography arises partly from his broader critique of critical art. Despite their different starting points, approaches, and conclusions, they often converge on the same concerns regarding the relationship between the camera, the photographic image, the viewing of that image, and the possibilities of subsequent political mobilization, or its efficacy. While often turning to art installations, Rancière has also engaged with photographic images, including Martha Rosler's series "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home" (1962-1972) which contains photomontages that pasted scenes from the Vietnam War onto peaceful American domestic interiors adorned with consumer goods. Using these images as illustrations, Rancière traces the reasoning and logic buttressing the common acceptance of artistic interventions into political events that aim to resist power and domination wherever they arise.¹⁴⁰ This critical art schema consists of several processes: first, in Rosler's case, the collage of heterogeneous visual elements exposes the brutal reality of war concealed by the appearance of a happy and comfortable American existence. The collage highlights the connection between these two worlds – war and capitalism. Second, being exposed to this reality and knowledge, viewers of the image are assumed to be enlightened and awakened to their own complicity in the matter; and third, they would mobilize in opposition to participate in whatever political struggle is in question. Critical art's strategy thus travels from the production and the sensory experience of "strangeness" (Vietnam in an American living room) to a critical awareness of the reason for this strangeness and to a mobilization of viewers due to that awareness (*DS* 142-143).

¹⁴⁰ Rancière has commented on Rosler's series on several occasions, see chapters two and four of *TES*, chapter ten of *DS*, and the chapter entitled "Problems and Transformations of Critical Art" in *AD*.

Rancière, however, rejects this critical art strategy that traces a straight line from an intolerable image to an awareness of the reality the image aims to produce, and to the wish to act and change. This strategy assumes a smooth and predictable link from artistic representation to intellectual awareness through to political mobilization. The underlying rationale here, he argues, is that “art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things ...” (*DS* 135). But this assumption wrongly presumes the ignorance and passivity of the audience and the knowledge of a supposedly enlightened artist, and pits them against each other in a binary opposition. Furthermore, as Rancière stresses, even if artworks manifest overt political views, they would not necessarily lead to a different understanding or perception of the world, much less to mobilization. “There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action,” he claims (*DS* 143).

According to Rancière, what this critical art paradigm suggests is a consensus between cause and effect, intention and consequences, as I also examined in chapter three when discussing Paris’s hip hop music. But not all is lost for critical art; Rancière is not dismissing the political capacity of images wholly. Against the critical paradigm that threads perception, affect, comprehension, and action, Rancière offers his own intervention through the idea of an aesthetic rupture and dissensus, which I introduced in chapter one. The concept of dissensus was also explored in chapter two when discussing the protagonist Changez from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. There, dissensus was seen as a political process that challenged the sensible by the appearance of the non-part or the inaudible. Dissensus in this chapter is seen as a process initiated through artistic practices. In Rancière’s original conception of dissensus, as related to the police distribution of the sensible, the concept is invoked to challenge the sheer contingency of the police order and to claim the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. It is the assumption and the enactment of that equality which are vital (*D* 30). In the case of the Taliban and in regard to aesthetics and visual representations, dissensus has nothing to do with equality; the issue does not concern equal access to the media or to self-representation, as in more general struggles relating to politics of representation. Dissensus here is related to an aesthetic rupture understood within Rancière’s conceptualization of three artistic regimes: the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic, to which the rupture belongs. Understanding these regimes allows one to assess the relations of artistic practices to society and, therefore, their nature, function, and efficacy, or what they are capable of doing and achieving.

As I have also outlined in chapter one, this loss of destination and functions in the aesthetic regime creates a paradox where artworks have their own specificity in terms of having their own separate sphere of sensory experience, but not a specific place in society. These two possibilities serve as the two “politics” of aesthetics for Rancière. The politics of art points to the two sides of that paradox: on the one hand, “the resistant form,” indicating art that desires its autonomy and evades signification. In its refusal to become part of the normal, ordinary forms of sensory experience, it actually yields its political potential. It is being “apolitically political” (*AD* 42). On the other hand, there is the politics of “art-becoming-life,” which concerns art that refuses to remain in that autonomy and chooses to engage with and intervene in everyday life to bring change, but this intervention also leads to its own self-elimination, as there is no longer a separation between it and other spheres. Critical art would consist of a constant negotiation of these two logics. He argues:

Critical art has to negotiate between the tension which pushes art towards ‘life’ as well as that which, conversely, sets aesthetic sensoriality apart from the other forms of sensory experience. It has to borrow the connections that foster political intelligibility from the zones of indistinction between art and the other spheres. And from the solitude of the work [i.e. art’s autonomy] it has to borrow the sense of a sensible heterogeneity which feeds political energies of refusal. It is this negotiation between the forms of art and those of non-art which makes it possible to form combinations of elements capable of speaking twice over: on the basis of their legibility and on the basis of their illegibility. (*AD* 46)

As Rancière has pointed out, photography is paradigmatically ambivalent, oscillating between art and non-art and shifting between the image “as artistic operation and the image as production of a representation” (*TES* 107-109). This dialectic between autonomous art and art-as-life speaks directly to ongoing developments in the field of photography. T.J. Demos, for example, has discussed this tension between photography’s relation to life and its autonomy (124). The first role puts photography in a documentary mode that insists on photography’s ability to, for example, record the reality of social relations, document social injustices, or expose political abuses. War photography, one that endeavors to bear witness to others’ suffering and to produce images that evoke compassion, operates through this documentary status, as I discussed in the previous section. The second role sees the photographic image more as artificial fabrication, a fictional construct that underscores “a subjective mode of depiction appreciated largely for its

aesthetic qualities, where artistic autonomy has superseded photography's evidentiary or communicative function" (Demos 125).

Traces of these two functions – art and non-art – are discernable in the hand-colored portraits of Taliban fighters, and it is this intertwining of document and aesthetics that can offer a very different conceptualization of the Taliban photographs. They also suggest an interventionist potential via aesthetic rupture and dissensus. Given that the Taliban sitters, with one exception, all face and gaze the camera straight on and assume the same posture, these head-and-shoulder shots might have been intended originally for official identification purposes. As such, their primary ontological designation seems clear as an unequivocal document, where the art of photography merges with daily life as it documents, records, and represents reality, illustrating art-becoming-life. What is immediately conspicuous about these images, however, is the added colors that appear artificial and garish. The photographers had transformed an ordinary black and white image into something livelier. The addition of these vibrant, if not startling, blue and deep turquoise, as well as red, yellow, and green hues in the background (see figure 5.14) introduces new sensory elements that intensify visual/sensory stimulation and transform the original document into a more artistic and sensorial experience.



Figure 5.14. A photograph from the *Taliban* collection showcasing hand-tinted coloration and a colorful added-on backdrop. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

Although hand-tinted coloration might not be so common in the West for ordinary snapshots due to the general ubiquity of color film and processing, it is very much a part of contemporary art practices. These Taliban photographs immediately evoke the aesthetics of works by the French duo Pierre et Gilles, whose retouched photographs are often noted for their

religious and mythic symbolism and homoeroticism.¹⁴¹ Aesthetic affinities can also be seen with the works of Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, in particular his series *Terrorist* (2004) and *Ready to Order* (2007-2008), both of which showcase Eastern memorial portrait imagery, religious motifs, and visual forms of photography studios in the Middle East.¹⁴²

In the *Taliban* collection, the engagement with sensible materiality is heavily emphasized as traces of the photographer-painter's artistic intrusion disrupt the photographic surface through an act of self-disclosure. For example, the tint used on the sitters' faces and for the background has seeped onto the edges of their white turbans, and the outline of those turbans has been retraced by hand as harsh lines can be clearly seen. Accidental drips of paint and stains are also noticeable. The presence of the photographer/painter is foregrounded, whether intentionally or not. His presence, as well as his own aesthetic role and creative proficiency become prominent. This post-production and the engagement with materiality actually overshadow the image itself. It becomes not just a photograph of a Taliban fighter but also an image about colorization and the disruption of the photographic surface. Nevertheless, this interaction between surface and paint is not a complete retreat into materiality and a demonstration of pure form's lack of signifying function; it is not endeavoring to secure the autonomy of sensory experience. Rather, it is a shifting between the images' sensible form and its documentary mode and (political) meaning.

In figure 5.14, the image's documentary (non-art) roles – whether it is for the quotidian purpose of keepsake, or as official photographs of identification, thus reflecting the state's controlling gaze, or intended for the more somber purpose of establishing grievability, as I explored in the last section – all have to negotiate with the add-on conspicuous colorization which supplants political understanding. Materiality, thus, continuously obfuscates meaning and understanding. Tensions arise between the politicized and apoliticized of the image, as viewers have to negotiate with legibility (male faces, citizenry, dead Taliban) and sensorial strangeness (bright colors). This interplay can be seen again in two colorized photographs that have as their backdrops an added oval ring of orange rim and yellow glow that encircles the sitter's head (see figures 5.15 and 5.16).

¹⁴¹ For a selection of their works, see their page on artnet, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/pierre%20et%20gilles/>, accessed May 1, 2013.

¹⁴² To view both series, go to Hassanzadeh's webpage at <http://khosrowhassanzadeh.com/index.php>, accessed May 1, 2013.



Figures 5.15 and 5.16. Two photographs from the *Taliban* collection with a halo-like symbol in the background. Details of original print size are unavailable. © T. Dworzak Collection / Magnum Photos. Reprint permission purchased from Hollandse Hoogte.

This halo-like symbol injects religious overtones into the image. The usage of a halo in connection with sainthood is part of Christian iconography, but there are artistic parallels in other religions utilizing the symbolism of light, with depictions of rays of light radiating from the holy person's head or an enfolding illumination as a backdrop. Although Islam is a monotheistic religion, the veneration of holy and saintly men and imams does exist for some Muslims.¹⁴³ Take as an example popular depictions of the Wali Sanga, the revered saints of Islam on the island of Java, which exhibit an enveloping glow (see figures below).



Figures 5.17 and 5.18. Depictions of two of the Wali Sanga, or “9 Saints,” of Java. Details of original print size and photograph credits are unavailable. Images accessed from <http://www.indonesiamatters.com/1697/syncretism-example>. Copyrights belong to original source.

For the Taliban images, assuming that yellow oval is suggestive of a religious motif, the painter-photographer has advertently sacralized both the scene and the sitter, imbuing what was

¹⁴³ This veneration has common manifestations, including visits to saints' tombs and shrines. Another practice, according to Hassanzadeh, is that photography studios in rural Iranian villages offer images of respected imams as backdrops against which customers can have their photographs taken.

once a more banal photographic document for identification purposes with the weight of the sacred. This addition of color might be introduced to elevate the sitters' status as religious martyrs worthy of veneration and hero worship. Added to the previous functions of memorializing and designating a life and its death, the images are now also reflecting the sitter's hopes of honor. What we see on these photographs are not just the Taliban faces they literally show, but a somewhat morbid relationality between these faces and the photograph's material surface: paints that already prophesized these sitters' impending deaths and hoped-for martyrdom, creating an interplay between materiality and meaning. At first sight, sensorial elements seem to be aiding an understanding of images rather than contending with it. But are they? The colorization is also simultaneously multiplying and challenging meanings and refusing to be overtaken by solid understanding: can the images also be seen as a mockery or parody of the martyrdom arising from the fundamentalist religiosity of the Taliban regime? Is this photographic apotheosis of Taliban fighters (playfully?) aimed at stoking the Taliban regime's iconoclastic ire? For by sacralizing the image, the photograph might invite a viewing through the lens of reverence and worship, precisely the main concern behind the prohibition of *tasweer*. The force of the images' legibility and the force of their non-legibility continue to compete. Sensoriality is not overpowered by meaning, but neither is meaning disregarded by sensoriality. Seen within Rancière's paradigm, what these two politics of the images – traces of the photography-becoming-life through the function of the legible document, and traces of autonomous aesthetic qualities through colorization – produce is a tension between the mind's intellectual faculty that searches for understanding and the sensoriality that engages with materiality.

Here I have used the word tension, but as I detailed in chapter one Rancière has described this state as a “free play” of one's faculties between the sensuous and the rational, a situation opposing the usual subordination of the former to the latter.¹⁴⁴ Subsequently, this freedom between the faculties creates in viewers what Tanke has interpreted as a state of reflection in which the artwork “disrupts reason's ability to think and dispense with sensible material” (106). What this suggests in practice is that an understanding of these hand-tinted Taliban images and an interpretation of them are neither forthright nor readily accessible and attainable, as one is required to shuffle between the images' potential political messages, including the gravity of notions such as mourning and grievability, and the glare of bright and cartoonish backdrop

¹⁴⁴ For Rancière's discussions of “free appearance” and “free play,” see *AD* 27-32; *TES* 64-69; *DS* 115-119 and 176.

colors. That undecidedness of the representation is not easily resolved and should be left intact.

What troubles Rancière about the critical paradigm that fuels politicized art, such as Rosler's works, seems to be how the sensory strangeness created by heterogeneous visual elements in those cases is suppressed rather than nurtured, given that the strangeness soon dissipates with the intended aim to provide awareness and legibility, and further, to be instrumentalized for a determinate political efficacy of mobilization. In the Taliban context, a tension-filled, unstable, and precarious encounter with the faces of the enemy occasions what Rancière would call an efficacy of dissensus (*DS* 139). As already explained in chapter one, dissensus can be best understood by highlighting the two definitions of "sense": the first entails sensory presentation and sensate (i.e. bodily) experiences, and the second meaning and understanding, just like the two elements of the sensate and meaning that compete in a state of play. In addition, an efficacy of dissensus points to that conflict between these two senses occurring at the intersection between the image and the viewing of that image. "Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation [of the art object] and a way of making sense of it [in the spectator], or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'," says Rancière (*DS* 139). Dissensus stresses and values the suspension of a straight line, a determinable link, between the artist's intention, an artwork or photographic images in this case, and the spectator's gaze. Consequently, Rancière has warned that because of this aesthetic disconnection, artworks cannot anticipate or predict its effects, especially when it comes to its oppositional ambitions. To do so would also be to presuppose the viewers' imbecility, passivity or gullibility. As he contends: "Images change our gaze and the landscape of the possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects" (*TES* 105).

But paradoxically that lack of anticipation and the uncertainty of effects is an oppositional resource when one is confronted with such an image of the Taliban enemy. These images can produce effects, but they do so only because of an original rupture that challenges the direct cause-effect relationship (*DS* 142). Dissensus breaks that relationship between representations within the frame and the viewing of that frame, problematizing any claims of a smooth transmission of pathos, sentiments, knowledge or awareness. Butler's haunting would be difficult to defend when seen against dissensus. Instead, this dissensual encounter with the Taliban fighters through the colorized images introduces a new mode of sense perception to engage with the post-9/11 terrorist enemy, modifying both what can be seen of them and what can be thought of them and how the two – sense and sense – can even be related to each other. It

does so not necessarily on the level of representation by providing alternative or more accurate images of the Taliban, or on the level of representability by contesting who can or cannot be represented, but by inserting a dissensual way of seeing them that is in itself fundamentally precarious, undetermined, and contingent.

Dissensus has introduced a different kind of affective association: one of indeterminacy. This kind of dissensual visuality contests the restricted wartime realm of the visible because it cannot help but question all other forms of seeing the enemy and the affective relations that arise, whether it is one influenced by dehumanizing frames that sustain calls of extermination or a form of seeing through humanizing frames that encourage mourning and non-violence. Seeing these colorized Taliban photos dissensually will likely accomplish neither, resisting all such deterministic, static, and predictable viewings and reinforcing the elusiveness of one's enemy instead. This uncertain task of sensing and making sense of the enemy is exactly the opposite of a visual culture that seeks to visually solidify and know the enemy for security purposes. A lucid form of seeing and knowing is especially vital in the war on terror, as the more traditional practices of enemy construction and visualization are complicated by the nature of terrorism, which is characterized by the radical uncertainty of the "unknown unknowns."¹⁴⁵ But these colorized Taliban photographs refuse to satisfy this heightened demand and anxieties for visual and ontological access to the enemy.

Recall, too, that Dworzak had described this collection of Taliban photographs as objects of a serendipitous discovery. He underscores the fact that they were "found" rather than taken by himself. By attributing these photographs as works of the local Afghan photographers, several of whom Dworzak dutifully names and thanks in his introductory text, these images gain extra cachet for their "native" aesthetic and credibility. This implies that they might serve as an "authentic" visual encounter with the Taliban. This "discovery" premise is also voyeuristic in that viewers are offered access to see private images that were not meant to be seen in the first place; the images acquire a "revelatory" effect and promise possibilities of unintended intimacy. Through this framing of "an accidental discovery," the visual (and even epistemological) seduction is intensified. But while *Taliban* excites in viewers a longing to see, its images have the oppositional potential to thwart seeing. One actually does not see them properly but dissensually. They produce an antagonistic form of visuality that actually obstructs the pursuit of

¹⁴⁵ The "unknown unknowns" are the famous words of the former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, spoken during a NATO press conference in Brussels on June 6, 2002. For the transcript, visit <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm>, accessed May 1, 2013.

visual lucidity, creating more productive possibilities to modify what is perceptible and knowable.

Conclusion

Akin to the post-9/11 “Portraits of Grief,” these Taliban images have been displaced from the private and the domestic to the public and global, acquiring new political capacities and being glimpsed at by unintended and accidental viewers/addressees along the way. The pictures depict the Taliban fighters through studio photography aesthetics that make these images incongruous with other standard photographs of the Taliban represented through the genre of war photojournalism. More importantly, they inaugurate a transformation of the expected wartime Taliban (body)-battlefield (space)-war (activity) association to a body-space matrix guided by pretense and desires. They also articulate various expressions of masculinity and sexual attitude. As such, these Taliban photographs might be considered resistant images in that they undermine existing limits of what can be seen through the insertion of alternative and counter images to enlarge the previously circumscribed sphere of appearance and visibility. Seeing the Taliban becomes more demanding as the images solicit a form of visibility motivated by ethical concerns, and foster illegibility and uncertainty wrought by an aesthetic dissensus. Seeing the Taliban also means seeing them differently, ethically or dissensually. These three ways of seeing diverge at times but also converge to show that the Taliban are no longer spatially or genre stable. They are neither evil as those to be killed nor transparent as those to be known, thus ushering more perplexing and enigmatic visual and imaginative encounters.