

Essay

(I MUST CONFESS ...)

Neil Emmerson



ONE

In 2005, I had been at once shocked and intrigued by the amateur photographic images coming out of Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq of the torture and humiliation performed on Iraqi prisoners by American defense force workers. One of these images – of a cloaked and hooded man perched precariously on a flimsy box, arms spread with hands connected by wire to the wall behind him, his body slumped in constraint, shame and supplication – drew on a repertoire of well-known visual tropes. This particular image I saw as loaded with historical references from both the fine arts and popular culture.

In *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (2007), Stephen F Eisenman outlines what is called the 'pathos formula,' whereby the willing victim of physical anguish and torture has been depicted throughout the history of the Western visual arts as a figure of glorious suffering; this trope begins in the Classical period and is turned by Christian visual culture into an equally sensuous and ecstatic martyrdom. These images and their effects, Eisenman argues, have served across the years "as an instrument of imperialist self-justification and racist violence."¹ Ironically, many examples of such paintings and sculptures employ sensuous, nude, muscular male bodies as the vehicles of their depictions of divine chastisement and punishment. It might be interesting to note at this point the range of homosexual acts that prisoners of Abu Ghraib were forced to enact in order to humiliate and shame them.

In the not-so-distant past, images of or based on Classical and Christian art in printed publications offered one of the few opportunities where some homosexual men might be able to identify their desire. Gazing at these pictures of either naked or semi-naked men in the throes of an ecstatic agony could be passed off as an interest in the history of art, in certain other Grecian or Christian ideals, or even in health and body-building.

In *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), Yukio Mishima describes the effect of the recognition of his homosexual desire on his first viewing of a reproduction of Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian*: "That day, the instant I looked upon the picture, my entire being trembled with some pagan joy."² In *Iconology and Perversion* (1988), Allen S Weiss considers the possibility of "a 'hermeneutics of misreading' where the effects of libidinal oscillations are factored into the interpretive scheme as the feature of its very indeterminacy."³ He points out that it was the affective power of the image rather than its particular semiotic intent that raised Mishima's passions. Mishima consequently posed for a famous photographic parody of Guido's St Sebastian and, in so doing, produced a "perverse inversion of the roles of iconographic features and incidental details within the picture," by playing up such incidental details as the "white, matchless nudity" of the martyr; and with his pose or attitude alluding more to beauty and pleasure rather than to pain or suffering.

What sort of 'pagan joy' might be ignited by the viewing of this picture from Abu Ghraib, laced as it is with pathos, and how might it be reconciled with the guilt of implication in an acknowledgement of the desires operating in the correspondence between victim and perpetrator; or the politics operating between a poetics of sadomasochism and 'imperialist self-justification?' A 'hermeneutics of misreading' here might invert the direction of this rupturing of the public realm via the secret whereby the affective power of this public image penetrates back into the private, subconscious zone of the viewer; giving form to its secrets and lighting up places seldom revealed.

TWO

Working on from a series of projects that involved the use of found images of anonymous, hooded, male figures sporting outfits worn in the contexts of chemical warfare, camouflage and capture, I began a project by constructing garments with the aim of hybridising elements of these designs with elements of garments from the psych ward (straightjackets), the penitentiary (stenciled jumpsuits), the religious (sacramental robes) and body bags – outfits associated with the institutions that, presently and historically, have played a role in labeling, controlling and eliminating homosexuality. As if the terror of torture, or for that matter the anguish of the closet, has ever really gone out of



Figures 1-5. From a set of 20 AV digital and screen prints on Velin Arches paper. 105 x 75cm.

fashion. Labeled *G O D (gay on demand) exclusive outfits for espionage and terror*, this range of hybridised uniforms was initially installed as *the glass closet* in 2009. Under the sign of international haute couture, it imitated an up-market fashion boutique on the main shopping street of Dunedin in New Zealand.

Presented here are a series of photographs of one of these costumes, out of the closet, and now inhabited by a young, male model. Through the use of transparent and semi-transparent fabrics the sensuous nude is discernable. Across a series of 'poses,' supplication is traded for confession; resignation; seduction; and, finally, ecstatic transcendence.

In regard to the use of the artist's model, I draw on Moe Meyer in his book *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (1994), where he refers to various figures in Oscar Wilde's writing: "The artist's model ... signals what appears to be his use of the 'pose' as an organizing metaphor through which to codify the surfaces of the Other's body."⁴ (Can this 'organizing metaphor' be seen at work in the modeling of prisoners at Abu Ghraib? Surely not consciously, although the choreographed interactions of prisoners indicates a planned and collaborative management of this situation.)

According to Meyer, considering Wilde's construction of the artist's model and the pose, we discover a remarkable phenomenon: "The model as pastiche, divorced from his own interiority, offered up his body surfaces and made them available for inscription by the artist. The artist, in turn, used them to signify his own inner state. The effect achieved by the model was the construction of a 'neutral' surface, a *tabula rasa*, acting as an objectified site of the artist's desire."⁵

Wilde considered art to be primarily the conjunction of desire and vision. Meyer uses Jonathan Dollimore's term 'transgressive reinscription' and quotes him again "to indicate a subversive, resistant and destabilizing maneuver in which identification with, and desire *for*, may coexist with parodic subversion *of*."⁶

Through his experiments with this theory, Wilde was attempting to construct a public homosexual identity in an historical situation where one didn't yet exist. Yukio Mishima may not be doing exactly the same thing, but the methodology is similar if not the same. He realises his desire by recognising it projected onto the portrait of St Sebastian, and then later appropriates that desire back onto the surfaces of his own body. Does he become at once both desiring subject and desired object? This relational movement between inside and outside, between the private and the public, secrecy and disclosure, provides a schematic model for the operations of the closet. Wilde might have gone some way towards creating a physical presence for the public recognition of a homosexual interior identity, but inadvertently he also helped to create the reign of the 'telling secret.' His trial and incarceration operate as a public emblem for both the announcement of the modern homosexual and simultaneously the "exactions, ... deformations, ... disempowerment and sheer pain" of the closet.⁷

THREE

In 2008, a report appeared in the world news media that MI5 in Britain was seeking the help of the gay lobby Stonewall to recruit 'out' homosexual spies. It seems that, with the rapid growth of the intelligence service since the London bombings of 2005, a certain turnabout had occurred in a situation where, until relatively recently, gays were barred entry into top jobs in the spy business due to the perception that they were more prone to blackmail than their straight counterparts. Should I contemplate a change of occupation, I asked myself?

How might self-identified, 'out' homosexual spies be of particular help in this 'war on terror,' considering that it is directed towards the more fundamentalist elements of the Muslim world? Surely in the places where homosexuality is outlawed – indeed heavily sanctioned, with dreadful punishments – it would be an enormous disadvantage for precisely the same reasons that it was officially avoided in the British intelligence services some years ago? The idea seemed absurd. Why would MI5 engage 'out' gay men in a situation that would require them to go back into the closet and compromise them so gravely?

Then again, maybe it is precisely the closet that MI5 is interested in. I wondered about whether there was a kind of transnational, homosexual underground operating in the Middle East. Clandestine connections between private individuals, groups and communities have certainly been developed before on the basis of a commonly oppressed homosexual desire and can connect people from disparate backgrounds both locally and beyond the intolerant, indeed hostile, worlds in which they live. Discrete relations between homosexual men seeking connections, community and sex with other men these days can be effectively facilitated by the internet. The skills derived from living a double life would not go astray in the spy business, I would imagine. Could these networks, with their clustered communities that operate below the radar, appear to be functioning somewhat like terrorist cells? Or might they not be fertile recruiting grounds, where those whose freedom of sexual choice is being denied might become sympathetic collaborators in this war on terror?

Here, a professional investment in secrecy could further complicate its function as “the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private /public, inside/outside, subject/object, are established, and the sanctity of the first term kept inviolate. And the phenomenon of the ‘open secret’ does not, as one might think, bring about a collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.”¹⁸

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990): “There are risks in making salient the continuity and centrality of the closet, in an historical narrative that does not have as a fulcrum a saving vision – whether located in past or future – of its apocalyptic rupture.”¹⁹ She identifies the risk of glamorising the closet and by default rendering it inevitable or, in some manner, of value.

By switching the terms of what is valued in regard to the sexuality of its spies, does MI5 then risk glamorising the closet as well as capitalising on it at the same time?

Sue-Ellen Case is critical of refashioning queer culture into the dominant culture’s discursive metaphors. “The danger incurred in moving gay politics into such heterosexual contexts is in slowly discovering that the strategies and perspectives of homosexual realities and discourse may be locked inside a homophobic ‘concentration camp’.”¹⁰

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- 1 Stephen F Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).
- 2 Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, trans. Meredith Weatherby (New York: New Directions, 1949/1958).
- 3 Allen S Weiss, *Iconology and Perversion* (Melbourne: Art & Text Publications, 1988).
- 4 Moe Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.
- 5 Ibid., 83.
- 6 Ibid., 78.
- 7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), 68.
- 8 Sedgwick quoting DA Millar; *ibid.*, 67.
- 9 Sedgwick, *ibid.*, 68.
- 10 Sue-Ellen Case, quoted in Meyer, *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, 113.