
From Behind the Interrogation Room Walls: Private Tortures and Public Records

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Abstract

Despite its history of taking place within the privacy of jail cells, interrogation rooms, and other spaces hidden from public view, the practice of torture has simultaneously produced public records of its subsequent aftermath. From the fastidious record-keeping of brutal regimes such as the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, to the efforts of human rights organizations across the globe to reckon with the ultimate fate of victims, torture has come out of the proverbial shadows through the act of documentation, and resulted in the post-mortem display of its techniques and consequences. With the advent of more immediate and quotidian access to the means of visual documentation, particularly cell phone cameras, the documentation of torture has not only taken on these more urgent characteristics, but also has increasingly fallen into the hands of the perpetrators of torture themselves. Notwithstanding the record-keeping practices already evident in aforementioned regimes in Cambodia and also Argentina, for example, contemporary chronicling of torture is often no longer delegated to second or third-party observers, but is done by the individuals inflicting the torture itself. In fact, the time-lag that characterized past revelations of records and acts, that was a by-product of the very privacy of torture and its records, has almost been erased by the ability to upload videos and other images to public platforms like YouTube, for example. Focused on videos shot on cellphone cameras and uploaded to YouTube as well as photographs shared on WhatsApp by members of the National Civil Police in El Salvador, that depict the abuse of Salvadoran youth, this presentation analyzes a phenomenon of televisual impunity and torture that disregards the socio-political or legal consequences of brutality through the ready, public display of records documenting abuse. More than just a by-product of technological innovations, this shift in approach, perspective, and access to evidence of human rights violations is indicative of the continuing erosion of the divisions between public and private spheres, and the increased disregard perpetrators of violence continue to have for the repercussions of their actions.

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