

## The Real War: Seeing, Witnessing, and Power in Phil Klay's "Frago"

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### Abstract

Phil Klay's short story "Frago" (2014) is a true picture of a military mission in Iraq. It is a key text as it helps us understand how war is seen today. This paper uses Gil Z. Hochberg's ideas. These ideas are Watching (Surveillance) and Witnessing from her book *Visual Occupations* (2015). The main event is terrible. It is the finding of two tortured Iraqi men. This event is a visual shock. It shows the American military's look as not enough. It fails to truly witness the suffering. The structural architecture cuts between military talk and normal life. This shows how the occupation system and the soldier's need to cope twist the Iraqi suffering. It makes the suffering a reason for American feeling instead of a call for political action. The soldiers are not to be blamed for this failure of witnessing because it essentially results from the military's visual control, which maintains the focus exclusively on American war experience. This implies an ideologization of the act of literary representation because it is shaped by power relations.

**Keywords:** Representation, Visuality, War, Witnessing, Surveillance, Gaze

الحرب الحقيقية: الرواية، الشهادة، والسلطة في قصة «فراغو» لفيل كلاي

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### الملخص

تقدّم القصة القصيرة «فراغو» (2014) للكاتب فيل كلاي تصويرًا واقعيًا لمهمة عسكرية في العراق، وتعدّ نصًا محوريًا لفهم الكيفية التي تُرى بها الحرب في الزمن المعاصر. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على مفهومي **المشاهدة (المراقبة)** و**الشهادة** كما طرحتهما جيل ز. هوخبرغ في كتابها «الاحتلالات البصرية» (2015). يتمحور الحدث الرئيس حول واقعة مروّعة تتمثل في العثور على رجلين عراقيين تعرّضا للتعذيب، وهي حادثة تُحدث صدمة بصرية تكشف قصور النظرة العسكرية الأمريكية عن تحقيق الشهادة الحقيقية لمعاناة الآخر. ويُظهر البناء السردى القائم على التقطيع بين الخطاب العسكري ومشاهد الحياة اليومية كيف تؤدي بنية الاحتلال وحاجة الجنود إلى التكيّف النفسى إلى تشويه المعاناة العراقية وتحويلها إلى وسيلة لإنتاج شعور أمريكي، بدل أن تكون دعوة إلى الفعل السياسى. ولا تُحتمل الدراسة الجنود مسؤولية هذا الإخفاق في الشهادة، إذ يعود أساسًا إلى نظام السيطرة البصرية العسكرية الذي يُبقي التركيز محصورًا في التجربة الأمريكية للحرب. ويشير ذلك إلى أن فعل التمثيل الأدبي مؤدج بطبيعته، لأنه يتشكّل في إطار علاقات القوة **الكلمات المفتاحية:** التمثيل، البصرية، الحرب، الشهادة، المراقبة، النظرة.

## 1. Introduction

“Frago” is a short story from Phil Klay’s collection *Redeployment* (2014). The story presents a haunting first-person combat vignette in Fallujah during the American occupation of Iraq. The story captures masterfully the moral disorientation of the Iraq War (2003-2011). The authenticity of the war experience drives from Klay’s own experience as a veteran of the Iraq War. His active service in Iraq with the marine corps makes him a first-hand witness of the horrors of this war, especially during the armed insurgency in the cities of Anbar governorate and elsewhere in Iraq (Haytock 2018, p.161). The raid commanded by the narrator, a Marine sergeant, on an insurgents’ house in the outskirts of Fallujah unveils a moment of visual horror. The soldiers discover the tortured bodies of two Iraqi men facing a video camera. The condition of the tortured bodies is mind-blowing. This is a scene where atrocious violence is visualized to the extent that moral judgement, like human apprehension, is suspended momentarily. However, when the mission is over, the sergeant admonishes one shaken newbie Marine to do the basic things-eat, survive. This deals a blow to the act of ethical witnessing the story staged earlier via the tortured Iraqis. This is part of the politics of visualizing violence through image and picture (Hewitson 2017). The war violence is marketed to the American reader and it is only through highlighting the survival of American soldiers amid this insane violence, that violence can be made consumable. Ethical witnessing is marginalized by the visual regime of the military gaze because it is aligned with the Othered Iraqis.

The title “Frago” is a military technical term which means a “fragmentary order” (Bowyer 2007, p. 103). Frago as a military term refers to a quick, incomplete change to a plan. This technical word is used in this story to highlight the broken and maimed way American soldiers perceive the Iraq war. The story which is one of the interrelated stories in Klay’s collection *Redeployment* (2014) is a powerful work of post 9\11 war literature. It forces the readers to face the visual and ethical problems of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There is a scholarly consensus that Klay’s war short fiction is highly significant for showing the “vulnerable lives” of the Iraqi people. (Alosman 2022, p.915) argues persuasively that Klay’s short stories in *Redeployment* make the reader face the “culpability” of the American military presence as invaders and colonizer of Iraq. But it is crucial to look at how things are visually represented in the war. This is important for deep criticism. Modern wars are fought on the ground. They are also fought with images. The right to look is not equal. The power to decide what is seen is not equal (Saleh and Knieper 2017).

The aim of this paper is to analyze Phil Klay’s “Frago.” Through the visual politics lens. This research apply Gil Z. Hochberg’s ideas of Surveillance and Witnessing. This shows how the military’s visual system stops true ethical feeling for the occupied people’s suffering. This paper deals with three things. First, the story sets up a military Watching system. Second, it shows a moment of visual break. Third, it charts how the military system

and the soldier's mind create a Failure of Witnessing. This brings back the American gaze's dominance.

## 2. Visual Occupation

In her book, *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* (20215), Gil Z Hochberg provides a genuine insight into the intricate relationship between violence and Visuality in the representation of war and occupation (Heydon 2017). Based on Foucault's equation of vision and power, Hochberg argues that "while seeing (and being seen) commonly ensures political empowerment, these positions may in fact function as oppressive forces" (2015, p.17). Thus, the act of representation fashions opacity to interrogate the body politics of the conflict. Opacity, here, is "the ability to disappear, blindness, failed vision, and invisibility" (12015, p.7). The ways of seeing provide a rich visual vocabulary that significantly adds to our understanding of how the gaze structures the representation of war and occupation into power relations, and this in turn, dictates "what can be seen, who can be seen, how, and from what position" (2015, p.18).

Hochberg identifies "*three organizing principles* responsible for the configuration of visibility and the common borders of the seeable" (2015. p18) within the context of war and occupation; concealment, surveillance, and witnessing. The first signifies "a visual field restricted by a vast mechanism of erasure, denial, and obstruction of sight" (2015, p.18). Surveillance builds mainly of Foucault's panoptic discourse to designate the organizing principle of the visual field of the occupied as structured by the power of the military gaze. Witnessing is "a countervisual practice set up to undermine" the occupier's "visual dominance" (2015, p.18).

Hochberg distinguishes between visibility, vision, and visuality as the three concurrent matters that make up the visual politics of representation. Visibility, "the condition of being seen", and vision, "seeing or failing to see", are secondary to Visuality which denotes "the distribution of power determining who can see what and how" (2015, p.191). This is so because there is "*nothing intrinsic to vision and visibility that marks them as either emancipatory or suppressive*" (italics in original) (2015, p.191). On the contrary, visuality narratives entail such ends because of its intersectionality with power relations. Visuality as such is a site of ideological signification. This can be seen in the visual regimes of the American fiction on the 'Iraq War'. The core of such fiction, to borrow Hochberg's theorization, is "a colonial visual arrangement that grants unequal rights" to the occupiers and occupied (2015, p.190).

Colonial visuality are traditionally marked by their inclusive boundaries of "the barely visible, the visibly invisible, and the disappeared." (2015, p.190). Since such these visual arrangements are skewed, if not unnatural, they are often "associated with failure: the failure to see, the failure to appear, the failure to bear witness, or the failure to provide

visual evidence" (190). Such failures are important textual potentialities for the interrogation of the political and etheric ideologies of supremacy that engender the panoptic discourse of the visual narratives.

### 3. Seeing, Witnessing, and Power in "Frago"

The opening of "Frago" immediately shows the practical logic of Watching. The Marines have a mission. It is a fragmentary order. They must clear a suspected IED factory. This is an exercise in seeing and controlling the space. The narrator's use of military words shows how the military mind makes a complex world into simple tasks. The story opens with the stark command: "LT says drop the fucking house. Roger that. We go to drop the fucking house" (Klay 2014, p. 21). The narrator then describes the intelligence briefing in terse military language: "HUMINT says the place is an IED factory filled with some bad motherfucking hajjis, including one pretty high up on the BOLO list" (Klay 2014, p. 21). It is the collective military voice that talks here as the narrator loses his individual existence as a human. The narrative voice reflects the mechanical systematization of military operations and the satisfaction derived from clear, executable orders. The opening establishes how the military gaze transforms complex human terrain into tactical objectives and threat assessments.

Hochberg's framework is very useful. Watching is not just looking. It is about shaping what is seen. This helps the occupier's power (Hochberg, 2015). The military's look sees Iraqi people in two ways. They are either a possible fighter or someone who might be hurt. The world is seen through a gun sight. It is seen through a camera lens. This filter cares about finding threats. It does not care about recognizing people. The Marines must bring visual order to the chaos. They must make the confusing landscape clear for the military's needs.

The narrator describes the operation via a cold, technical statements to reflect the control of the visual field that the American monopolizes on the ground. Klay employs the language of journalistic reporting to focalize the informative load of the narration at the expense of the visual perspective: "We dropped the house. We had the roof. We had the grid. We had the intel" (Klay 2014, p.21). the soldiers are no longer human beings. They are behaving like programmed robots: "The whole thing was a textbook operation, a clean sweep. We moved like we were supposed to, clearing corners, checking sectors, communicating with short, sharp bursts of technical language" (Klay 2014, p.21). ultimately, the very world-view of these soldiers loses its human distinctiveness as operational commands replace dynamic human consciousness: "The world was reduced to a series of tactical problems, and we were solving them (Klay, 2014, p. 21). Human perception of the surrounding environment is effaced and narrative voice becomes a cold echo in an emotional void. This human stasis is the outcome of the military gaze that fix both the soldiers and Iraqi civilians in the shacking space of the panopticon. The contemporary military, by its own

foundational ideological architecture, utilizes the pervasive power of the panoptic gaze to discipline, monitor, and control behavior within its ranks and over the occupied civilians (Grassiani and Verweij 2014).

This military way of watching dehumanizes the Iraqi scene via the relentless grip of the panoptic gaze. The gaze is so powerful that it controls the soldiers' emotional and cognitive perception. The omniscient first-person narrator focalizes the external and technical details. The narrative utilizes this strategy as a way to cope with the brutal reality of combat. It mirrors the military's strict and mechanical focus on operational goals. The soldier becomes a robotic being whose mind is trained to act mechanically with no regard to the messy human reality. The only emotional and cognitive reactions allowed are those related to mission success or failure.

However, this tough visual regime of Watching control collapses when the two tortured Iraqi men are found in insurgents' bunker. This scene of discovery represents the main visual crisis in the story. The scene is focalized to make this terrible sight of pain shocking to the American readers in particular. This staging of war as a spectacle is meant to market the violence of the combat reality. The sharp visual focalization on the tortured bodies is meant to demonize the insurgents and cast the American military the good guys. The violence is meticulously depicted with clinical detail. The visualization of the tortured bodies is one of gothic horror: "The two men were tied to chairs. They were alive, but barely. One had a power drill hole in his ankle. The other had his hands tied behind his back with barbed wire, the wire digging deep into the flesh. The room was a mess of blood and propaganda posters" (Klay 2014, p.23). This scene of torture is meant to be a visual spectacle for the insurgents' power: "It was a spectacle, meant to be filmed, meant to be seen (Klay, 2014, p. 23). The insurgents utilize torture within the poststructuralist paradigms of the political technology of the body and the spectacle of the scaffold (de Valk 2016). It was meant to be filmed for propaganda. It was a visual message. It was designed to challenge the American story of control. But Hochberg's work suggests something. Even this different view depends on the extreme weakness of the occupied body (Hochberg, 2015). The tortured men are not active. They are raw material for a political show. They are a surface for power stories.

The Marines must be unwilling viewers. The visual proof is too much. It breaks their mission focus. The narrator's technical language stops. It is replaced by a raw description of the terrible act. This is the moment. The human body forces itself into the military's visual world. It is stripped of political and practical context. The sight is morally and mentally upsetting. The narrator says the men's condition is "cause enough for the men to resent being rescued by the Marines" (Klay, 2014, p. 23). The pain suggests the American presence is to blame. The occupation created the conditions for such acts.

The narrator's inner reaction shows the conflict. It is between soldier training and human feeling: "I looked at the drill hole, and then at the barbed wire, and then at the propaganda posters, and I felt the mission dissolve. The Frago was gone. All that was left was this ugly, messy, human thing" (Klay 2014, p. 24). This moment of truth registers a return of the repressed. The human asserts its return when the military panoptic gaze experiences a momentary destabilization: It was a failure of the eyes, a failure of the training. "We were supposed to be looking for IEDs, for bad guys, for tactical advantage. We were not supposed to be looking at this" (Klay, 2014, p. 24).

The visual shock leads to the main point. It is the Failure of Witnessing. Hochberg defines Witnessing as "a counter-visual practice set up to undermine" the occupier's visual control (Hochberg, 2015, p. 18). Witnessing means more than looking at pain. It means accepting the victim's full humanity. It means accepting the political situation. It means letting the image change one's position. But in "Frago," the Marines cannot do this. Their first reaction is not ethical. It is not political. It is practical. They secure the area. They call for medical help. They continue the mission. The visual horror is put in a box. It is hidden by military rules and language. The human reality is changed back to practical data. It is a casualty count. It is a safe zone. It is a problem to solve.

This failure is clear in the story's focus change. The Iraqi victims fade away. They were the main visual fact. The story turns to the American soldiers' pain. The young private is shaken. The Iraqi men's suffering becomes a trigger. It is a trigger for the American soldier's distress. The focus is not on the terrible act. It is not on the victims' humanity. It is on the psychological cost to the occupier.

The narrator describes this shift. It is a clear example of the failure of witnessing. As soon as the tortured bodies are evacuated and the area is secured "the mission was back on" (Klay 2014, p. 25). The human regress and the military visual regime is restored. The horrors of the visual spectacle must be cleansed in order to make violence consumable to the reader. The scene is duly rechanneled back to the American soldiers via the traumatization of the newbie private Miller: "The ruined bodies of the Iraqis were just a backdrop now, a reason for Miller's trauma. That's how it works. The suffering of others becomes a way to talk about our own suffering" (Klay, 2014, p. 25).

This transformation of pain into trauma is itself symptomatic of the politics of the American military's visual regime. G. Howard (2017) notes that Klay's war stories, notably "Frago", are deeply enmeshed in a military perspective. Klay struggles to present the real war but his efforts are deterred by the ideological apparatus of representation. "Frago" focuses on the American soldier's inner story, allowing some space for the Iraqi body. But the power of the military gaze keeps the focus on how the American soldiers experience the violent reality of combat. This results in the failure of witnessing because the visual proof is not a call for shared responsibility as much as a challenge to the war. This instance of

visuality is eventually assimilated into the personal trauma story of the individual American soldier.

Klay uses ironic dissonance to mirror the American soldier's mental and psychological coping. This is particularly clear at the end of the story. After the bloody scene of the tortured bodies the American marines quite unexpectedly sit to eat fruit cobbler. This ironic dissonance is a biting commentary on metal tricks that the soldiers need to survive the war violence and horror with intact mental sanity. This act implies that the soldiers have become so accustomed with violence and horror that they become normal happenings in daily combat missions: "Later that night, back on the base, we ate fruit cobbler. It was hot, sweet, and sticky. The kind of thing your mom makes. We sat there, eating cobbler, talking about the Yankees, talking about anything but the drill hole and the barbed wire" (Klay 2014, p. 26). This simple act provides a cathartic closure to both the soldiers and the readers: "The cobbler was the final word, the thing that sealed the memory away. It was the taste of normal, a way to tell ourselves that the world was still a place where you could eat dessert after a long day" (Klay, 2014, p. 26).

This dissonance is the story's final act of putting things in a box. The visual horror is sealed off. It is replaced by the physical reality of food. It is replaced by the unit's shared feeling. The political and moral weight is pushed down. It becomes a personal mental burden. The narrator focuses on the immediate and technical. This is a literary example of mental defense. The language is simple and strong. It is a "rat-a-tat rhythm that amps up tension" (Make Lit, 2014). But it keeps the reader and narrator safe. It keeps them away from the event's moral heart.

Watching and Failure of Witnessing are central. They are central to post-9/11 war books. Klay's work is compared to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (Howard, 2017). Klay focuses on the systems and language of modern conflict. The war Klay shows is not just mental. It is bureaucratic and technical. It is ruled by acronyms and quick orders. It is ruled by drones and cameras. The Failure of Witnessing in the story is like the civilian world's failure. The civilian world fails to understand the war's complexity. The civilian's look wants a simple story. It wants heroism or trauma. It twists the soldier's experience (Booth 2019). The military twists the Iraqi's suffering. Both are similar. The story focuses on the soldier's moral injury (Kunsa, 2023). This is a deep violation of core beliefs. It is linked to the visual shock. The soldier sees a terrible act. This act goes against his fighting ideas. The inability to fit this visual fact into a moral framework causes trauma. The fruit cobbler is an attempt to fix this injury. It denies the visual reality.

"Frago" presents a critique of war language. The extensive use of unfamiliar military jargon may sound alien to the reader but it is used purposefully to foreground the reality of war and focalize the narrative perspective in the point of view of the American military (Thompson 2018). The very term "Frago" is an ideologically employed language tool to foreground the unmanageable by turning a complex operation into a simple command. This ideologically motivated foregrounding casts the Failure of Witnessing as a failure of

language to signify reality. Language is used to alter the reality of war by subduing the element of moral horror (Haytock 2018, p.160).

#### 4. Conclusion

“Frago” is a powerful exposition of the horror of contemporary war. It provides a deep insight into the visual politics of the Iraq War. The application of Hochberg’s framework shows that the story is a careful exploration of military visual control. The Marines’ practical Watching is the normal stance that rationalizes the combat zone for them. It turns the occupied space of Iraq into a rationalized violence to be conquered via the politics of visibility. The discovery of the tortured men is a destabilizing moment of visual shock. It is an alternate view into the Other. It markets the human body and its pain into the scene as consumable to the American reader.

But the story’s closure signals a Failure of Witnessing. The Iraqi suffering is effaced and denied signification by keeping the narrative’s perspective filtered via the consciousness of the American soldier. The denial of any access to the consciousness of the Iraqi victims coincides with the transformation of the act of witnessing the tortured bodies into the American soldier’s trauma narrative. Ironic dissonance is called in to rationalize this failure of witnessing in terms of mental needs.

The significance of “Frago” lies in its honest portrayal of contemporary war where ethical and moral absolutes are contested. The story provides a rare moment of truth into the liminal space of the occupied Iraqi body. Iraqi people are victims and their suffering is horrible but they become mere objects in a terrible visual show because the very act of representation is governed by ideological power relations. The rare breaking of the visual regime in this story exposes how the panoptic gaze of the American military erases the suffering of occupied Iraqis. The story equates the failure of witnessing with the failure to see. Both failures originate in a larger failure of language to signify.

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