

Trauma and the Limits of Counter-Memory

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Dora Apel. *War Culture and the Contest of Images*. Rutgers University Press, 2012. 273 pp.

War Culture and the Contest of Images comes in the wake of the Bush administration's corporatized media production, chiefly represented by Colin Powell's testimony before the U.N. Security Council on the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the current extension of policies and practices of the Obama administration that continue to drive underground public knowledge and debate about secret detention camps. The book advances Apel's previous scholarship on the visual culture of two thanatocratic regimes that subtend modern subjectivity: the plantation society and National Socialist state. Apel's previous work in *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (2002); *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (2004) and, *Lynching Photographs* (co-authored with Shawn Michelle Smith) (2007) paid particular attention to the aftermath of the plantation and National Socialist regimes as they played out through the camera lens. At the center of her analysis in these initial studies was the question of trauma and secondary witnessing. The same is true of Apel's latest endeavor.

In *War Culture and the Contest of Images* Apel explores how our experience of the Iraq war is conditioned on the one hand by frenzied production of documentary images and the rational, administrative government suppression of images on the other. The circuit of production, circulation and suppression of war imagery produces the frame that structures the very experience of reality—a reality critical theorists and activists have worked hard to frame as “perpetual war.” Perpetual war calls into being a culture of trauma that organizes the experience of modern subjectivity. In a culture of perpetual war, witnessing becomes an occasion in which the citizen demonstrates complicity or dissent with the machinations of oppressive sovereign power. Apel examines how documentary art forms have become sites for the production of secondary witnessing, and by extension, recognition of the experience trauma. Apel's archive is culled from art installation, reenactment, photography, video games, and performance art and investigates these aesthetic practices as counter-hegemonic examples of seeing war that challenge dominant state corporate narratives.

Apel's examination of the visualization of war carefully avoids attributing too much power to the state. The germinal work of Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, and John Tagg on the history of photography contextualizes the book's introductory argument that documentary images need not always be theorized as hegemonic state practices. Apel argues that this previous scholarship, while a crucial advancement of the work of Michel Foucault on the representational mechanisms of state power and Western association between knowledge and vision, nevertheless offered a hegemonic view of documentary where documentary practice was intimately tied to shoring up the recurrent failures of capitalism. Instead, Apel asks that we consider the critical and combative potential of documentary as an aesthetic form used by citizens to enunciate the subject of human rights. Charting the ways citizens are "claiming the frame for the rightless" (5), Apel shows how documentary practices have evolved into counter-narratives that actively contest the machinations of perpetual war.

A major strength of the text is its organization. The tri-parted arrangement of the book suggests that war's traumatic aftermath is negotiated across three domains: the technological, the human, and the geographical. These bodies delimit the political economy in which images of war are produced and contested. The technological domain is elaborated first and exemplifies Apel's attunement to mediation, to the *processes* through which knowledge of war is achieved and archived. As Apel writes, "The effects of contemporary war culture and the incursion of the heightened power of the state into every kind of domestic or homeland space, creat[es] a perpetual state of hypervigilance in which 'homeland' is always mobilized for war. If military technology can be domesticated the domestic becomes militarized" (21). Called forth by the "war on terror," copious military advances in surveillance technology and behavioral modification techniques have been systematically domesticated into everyday American life. The art installation work of Krzysztof Wodiczko illustrates how military spy technologies permeate our everyday encounters, structuring critical discourse and conduct between citizens many miles from Iraq's combat zones. Apel shows how artists appropriate feelings and affects cultivated by the military such as the mood of suspicion and "code of silence" into installation work, introducing an experimental art context where the trauma of war may be publicly discharged.

The phenomenon of war re-enactment groups is another keen example of the militarization of domestic life; the entry of military strategy into the life-world. Unlike the multi-media artists profiled, those who participate in war re-enactments are less likely to spark a counter-narrative of war. Instead, Apel suggests their activities reify dominant state narratives of war that are uncritical. Apel's reading of the aesthetic practices of war re-enactors is all the more convincing in its unsettling account of the militarization of leisure as we continue to learn of the macabre intimacies of torture and other military techniques of motivation through the exposure of off-shore

military torture sites and clandestine tribunals. The annual re-enactment of the quadruple lynching of four black sharecroppers in Moore's Ford, Georgia is discussed as an example of the power of re-enactment to render a counter-narrative to sovereign patriarchal, racist, power. This is unsurprising given Apel's previous arguments that figured lynching photography as the key ephemera framing white hetero-patriarchal capitalist American culture. In terms of the domestication of military technique and technology, the multi-media artist appears to be a more reliable witness and translator of the atrocities of war and violent conflict than the pretend soldier who clings to the fetish of authentic war memorabilia purchased at a tradeshow.

Combat training tactics are by now familiar inside and outside of the academy. Military technologies mediate the process by which the soldier enters into a state contract that promises masculinity that is attached to heroism, and honor in and after battle. Apel reminds us that this contract is secured by state intervention into the bare life of the military subjects it disciplines. Yet, *War Culture* makes an important pivot away from surveillance technologies and behavioral techniques that produce the soldier's body to instead suggest that documentary images produce a more general "body of war." The condition of the human body photographed during war time has formed a political corpus: a photographic archive of war's trauma. This will not strike readers as a new argument. However, the book observes how sexual violence remains largely unphotographed and unpublished in the mainstream press; images of sexual violence occupy little to no place in the public archive of images that frame war. Apel's discussion of the Abu Ghraib photographs, released in 2004, offers a particularly cogent analysis of how pictures of the tortured body provide the alibi for an absent trove of images of rape and other documentation of sexual violence. Overwhelmingly, these images are images of Iraqi and Afghani people. Apel draws on Judith Butler to note how the absence of their suffering from public view renders these bodies ungrievable. If the most iconic image of the Iraq war remains the Hooded Man, Apel shows how the iconicity of this image, taken by an American soldier of the enemy combatant, depends upon the systematic U.S. government suppression of images of rape. To the extent they exist, images of rape are aggressively suppressed by state corporate interests framed in the interest of "good taste" (104). In this way, the book gestures at the idea of an absent icon, an image whose iconicity we may derive from its absence from the world.

Apel subtly draws out the relationship between photography and performance. Pictures of the tortured body are representations of military choreography that inform contemporary artistic performance repertoires. The notorious vernacular photography of former soldiers Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman appearing with tortured enemy combatants are read against the work of a number of performance artists, including Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. The confluence of gen-

der, race and sexuality vary the capacity of the performance artist who rehearses the embodied rhetoric of torture to enact a counter-narrative of just heroic war. Female performers offer particularly complex reflections on the liberal feminist politics that enfranchised women in terms of participation in the military and the arbitrary power it wields. While it may appear that it is again the reflexive performance artist who is most capable of contesting corporate government framing of the Iraq war, Apel pays equal attention to several portraits of wounded soldiers, demonstrating how they too enter a counter-hegemonic framing of war into the public domain. Images of military amputees document the aftermath of war largely unarticulated by the U.S. military. At home, out of uniform, the amputee soldier establishes the political corpus of war for what it is: broken bodies and their nations who struggle to recover and redress vicious psychic and physical deformations of the human category.

War Culture hones in on an economy of images that experiment with landscape aesthetics offering a geographical testimony of war. The landscape of war is framed according to corporate government models as well as models emerging from the art world. Apel examines a government model of war communication that tempers the chaotic and arbitrary nature of its power by managing the press, specifically the photographers who cover war zones. Apel offers a very astute reading of the “embedded” photographer, a program she demonstrates is entirely administered by the U.S. military (151). Public perception of the embedded war photographer is clouded by mystique. The very attunement to their visceral witnessing practices has made the public overconfident that war atrocities are impeded by this sort of ethical monitoring. This is hegemonic perception that leads our attention away from thinking critically about the *process* of embedding photographers in conflict zones. The book disarticulates the embedded war photographer from a hero or celebrity ethos by presenting critical reflections of photographers whose work was compromised by the legal demands and restrictions of the embedding program. The critical documentarian of war must not be satisfied with their images, however hard won. Instead, they ought to continue to produce their photography as counter-hegemonic narrative by disclosing the ways their whereabouts, “free” access and movement to combat planning and events is controlled by U.S. policy and the discourse of national security. For Apel, the task of the embedded war photographer is complete when he or she supplements the documentation of war by *speaking* publicly about the realpolitik conditioning the capture of their images.

Digital technologies negotiate the landscape of war with ever increasing sophistication. First person shooter video games are another visual technology the military uses to mediate the soldier’s experience of ground war. Apel is interested in the mimicry performed between leaked video footage of U.S. military kill missions and first person shooter games such as “Modern Warfare’s” *Call of Duty Series*. The work of Rich-

ard Grusin helps Apel focus on the role of the gaming console on the immersion of the soldier's body into the experience of battle. In the military-sponsored first person shooter game the military recruit and video-gamer are collapsed into an individual who believes they are prepared for war. The frequencies of friendly fire, mistaken and flat out arbitrary kill decisions are removed from the military-sponsored first person shooter game narrative. In this way, the highly edited experiences of the "embedded" documentary war photographer are brought into conceptual alignment with the video gamer's leisurely immersive play. Both are forms of spectatorship, simulations of war experience that are driven by military public relations. This is a provocative suggestion that emerges across Apel's analysis. The embedded photographer's spoken words, recorded as interview texts rather than pictures, offer the most ethical and critical articulations of witnessing.

While the management of embedded documentary photographers is another extension of military power, other communication models exist that offer critical approaches to documenting the geography of war. Art works exploring the Israel-Palestine conflict are critical approaches to documenting the landscape of war. Part III investigates critical shifts in Israeli art which subtend the book's final point that the crux of modern subjectivity is the ability to witness. Political and psychoanalytic trends haunt art work produced within the Occupied Territories, revealing how "Israeli identity is built upon overcoming victimization and the cult of the fallen even as it instrumentalizes that identity in order to perpetrate its own atrocities on a victimized people" (216). These expressive models reflect critical shifts in civil discourse in which citizens of photography increasingly counter powerful Zionist narratives of security and Arab terror.

War Culture and the Contest of Images is a significant contribution to cultural studies of photography and the afterlife of trauma. The book's conclusion reiterates a complaint made by Slavoj Žižek that academics have largely abandoned a commitment to issue radical anti-capitalist critique. This point, though well taken, feels sudden and somewhat perfunctory because Apel leaves undeveloped her perspective on the precise role of the image to speak an anti-capitalist vision. Apel concludes, "[I]n a global culture in which everyone can produce as well as consume public imagery in a contest of images, the mastery of images and their polemical power is crucial to any emancipatory and transformative program of social and political struggle" (236). In addition to assuming equal access to the Internet, technologies of seeing and a lack of retribution against those from non-liberal states who capture political atrocities, Apel's final position seems to read images of political violence as fetishes; this despite our susceptibility to misrecognize the production of human culture as a series of economic exchanges of commodities rather than social relationships. One is left wondering about the status of traditional forms of social justice organizing

where anti-capitalist political programs developed through collective struggles that were characterized by the spoken word and slow, gradual ideological positioning.

These are minor criticisms as Apel's well researched and thought provoking descriptions of the counter-hegemonic uses of war imagery does an innovative job of showing how the social contract gains expression through the exchange of photograph files. *War Culture and the Contest of Images* finds perfect company with other recent work on ethics and visual culture, most notably Lisa Cartwright's *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Post-War Representations of the Child* (Duke UP, 2008). Tina Camp's *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke UP, 2012) and Nicole R. Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago UP, 2011) both offer similar illustrations of modern subjects using photography to mediate social bonds across time and historical circumstances. Finally *War Culture* extends the arguments about state "containment and fragmentation of competing digital communities" (11) made in Elizabeth Losh's *Virtualpolitik: An Electronic History of Government Media-Making in a Time of War, Miscommunication and Mistakes* (MIT, 2009) to include art genres where subjects may rehearse hegemonic narratives of war or engage a counter-memory.

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