

Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012, 273 pp., \$72.00 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paperback).

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Dora Apel's (2012) *War Culture and the Contest of Images* examines the consequences of war as portrayed in visual images in the United States and the Middle East. The author examines political, discriminatory, and capitalists frames that are challenged by artistic works to create a counternarrative. Her work shows some of the dominant themes in war culture: oppression, political ideologies, trauma, emotional appeal, and visual framing. More important, it shows how visuals—photographs, video games, and performance arts—contest political ideologies and war culture. The book explores the visual works of many: Krzysztof Wodiczko; Vietnamese-American artist An-My Lê; Coco Fusco, a Cuban-American; Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo; Mexican American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his group, La Pocha Nostra; British artist David Cotterrell; American photographers Nina Berman and Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, the latter an American documentary filmmaker; Israeli artist Adi Nes; and Christopher Sims.



Apel's work excels as an examination of the importance of visuals in war, but it is also unique in that it explores the potential in visuals to legitimize war, and it challenges the hegemonic status quo while calling for change. *War Culture* discusses war, focusing on the visible and invisible effects of war by emphasizing human characteristics in the chapters. Apel tries to sexualize and humanize war as a creation of humankind that benefits human beings and also as a source of human punishment. Hence, the author adopts titles, transitioning from "romance" to "body" to "landscape of war."

Not including the introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into three parts: The Romance of War, The Body of War, and The Landscape of War. Each section includes two chapters. The first provides insight into the political nature and consequences of war, as well as its effects on minority groups and wounded veterans. Chapter 1 examines Krzysztof Wodiczko's works in which he uses video projections and public works in response to 9/11 and to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With modern media technologies, he highlights issues of marginalized groups in an interrogative manner. Apel focuses on the effects of militarization on U.S. war veterans and Iraqi civilians in Wodiczko's work, which adopts a documentary style and incorporates interviews and storytelling without a linear narrative, yet obscures the distinctions. The author discusses Wodiczko's *If You See Something . . .*, *Speaking Flames*, and *Out of Here: The Veterans Project* as post 9/11 projects in which Wodiczko uses emotional appeal to "expose the criminal and repressive effects of imperial power in its less visible aspects" (p. 46). *If You See Something . . .* explores oppression of minority groups, portraying immigration policies as promoting suspicion of

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immigrants, hence limiting their freedom and democratic rights in the United States. *Speaking Flames* draws attention to how the consequences of war affect Iraqi and Afghanistan veterans who are left to their own fates on their return from the respective conflicts. *Out of Here* discusses the consequences of war on civilians in war zones. In chapter 2, Apel discusses U.S. Civil War reenactments and how they glorify white supremacy through predominantly white participants while reinforcing racism in the exclusion of African Americans as participants. The author also discusses framing issues of slavery and racial violence in the reenactments. She agrees that while war reenactments may try to preserve history and recapture a nostalgic experience, they may also be used to provide a counternarrative against certain political stances and hegemonic narratives, such as racial differences, thus providing a different perspective of the historical past that could lead to a call for social change. Apel posits that reenactments, while pleasurable for those involved, may also serve educational purposes and promote military recruitment.

The second section of the book (*The Body of War*) shows the differences in the portrayals of masculine and feminine genders in war culture. Both chapters 3 and 4 discuss gender and sexuality. In chapter 3, Apel discusses the Abu Ghraib photos, which became viral in 2004. The author discusses themes of feminism and sexuality, and also notes the humiliation and control of Arabs and Muslims at the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prisons, as well as the use of torture and blackmail at these facilities. The author highlights the use of sexual photographs by U.S. soldiers and their allies of female prisoners to threaten them into becoming informants for the United States or be shamed before families and communities. U.S. mainstream media were portrayed as actors in covering up the activities of the U.S. military. Apel highlights a deliberate attempt by the news media to suppress images of rape and promote images of women soldiers to mask the torture and abuse that occurred at Abu Ghraib. This suggests that the media capitalize on women's presence in theaters of war to create a false reality, hence highlighting women's relationship to power and distracting the audience from reality.

In the military, women suffer gender and class discrimination. In a war culture, while men are portrayed as heroes, it is women's sexuality that is politicized. Apel's point supports such previous studies as Dowler (2002), who also discussed gender, feminism, and nationalism. In Coco Fusco's work, the author highlights responses to issues of sexual abuse and discrimination against women in the U.S. military. Fusco's video displays hidden activities and atrocities by the U.S. military, including the rape of Iraqi women, which is displayed on pornographic sites. The video employed cell phone technology to capture the Abu Ghraib images, thus creating a documentary effect. Discrimination suffered by minority groups in war cultures further draws attention to the excesses of white supremacy and nationalism. Providing access to these photographs of abuse against women could initiate a call for action by the public against the perpetrators.

In chapter 4, Apel explores the work of Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo and Mexican-American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Pena and the La Pocha Nostra group. Their work suggests a subjection of the body to stillness, portraying an effect of tableaux vivant. The author focuses on themes of pain and suffering. For example, Regina José Galindo, in her work, submits to an act of torture. Suffering and pain are also featured in the photos and reports about events in an Afghanistan hospital by British artist David Cotterrell, who observed patients and military medical staff with the Joint Forces Medical Group. Cotterrell observed emotional trauma, isolation and alienation from loved ones and family

as consequences of injury and war coupled with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cotterrell's photos also show wounded U.S. veterans whose services are no longer needed in the combat arena and are left to their fates. These photographs are depicted to challenge the status quo. Furthermore, Apel also discusses capitalist political power and control to accompany Martha Rosler's 2008 *Invasion*. The author suggests that capitalism poses a structure that allows young, white wealthy men to control the wealth of the nation.

The third and final section (The Landscape of War) discusses the media portrayal of war areas and actors. Chapter 5 discusses the use of video war games to construct war scenarios by imitating actual events. Apel points to a deliberate attempt to control the frame, as well as the content of the frame, by glorifying war and obscuring its consequences. The video games help recruitment in the military. For instance, the author discusses the use of video games for recruitment in a scenario titled "Virtual Army Experience," which involves NASCAR races and air shows across the country. Apel suggests that beyond promoting a militaristic mentality in youths through video games, it provides them a controlled version of the possible consequences of war. That is, youths who are introduced to war through video games may have a limited perspective of the dangers of war and the roles played by various actors. The author suggests that while video games may pass as recruitment tools for soldiers, it does not provide them the real battlefield experience of modern warfare. To counter controlled frames by the U.S. military, activist groups create counternarratives through new video games. For example, 2010's *Medal of Honor* used a role reversal effect by allowing U.S. players to assume the role of Taliban and shoot at U.S. soldiers to protect their Taliban loved ones. The chapter also exposes the use of video game technology in actual gunships. Useful in this chapter are the critical documentary works of Nina Berma and Christopher Sims, which Apel discusses as resistant to serve the liberal state. In chapter 6, the author focuses on strife in Israel and Palestine, highlighting the differences in the political visual framing of both countries during the conflict.

*War Culture and the Contest of Images* is critical in its analysis of the politics of oppression shown through different perspectives, which helps to create a counternarrative that challenges both hegemonic agenda and historically created narratives.

Apel's book will be helpful to filmmakers, modern and contemporary art historians, photojournalists, teachers, and students of visual communication.

### References

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