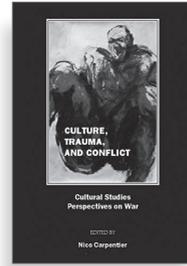


*Nico Carpentier (ed.): Culture, Trauma and Conflict.
Cultural Studies Perspectives on War*

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007/2015, 275 p., ISBN:
978-1847181909.



This reprint of the book from 2007 is highly welcome. Not least because of the ambition, as expressed by the editor, to contribute to the development of traditional war studies as well as cultural studies in general: “Cultural studies needs to engage with the horrific, the destructive, the violent-pornographic, the perverse, the vile and the prosaic in our present-day conjuncture, reassuming its key role of relentlessly uncovering the always hidden societal structures that generate oppression, suffering and death.” (p.13).

The well-composed collection of articles certainly offers insightful and complementary perspectives on conflict communication that go beyond studies of mediated war reporting of the “traditional” type that media researchers have produced over the years. The book is also a promising attempt to provide analytical perspectives elaborated from theory of ideology and from a contextual understanding of the complex relations between state-governed violence, mental receptions and discursive responses. Thus it offers the reader a selection of high-quality studies that combine a number of theoretical approaches from research on film narratives, media’s war reporting, psychological trauma, historical memorizing traditions, et cetera.

Some highlights can be mentioned in particular.

Rebecca A. Adelman’s study of *Last Letters Home*, a HBO production from 2004 that fea-

tures eleven families’ responses when reading the last letter from their sons and daughters killed in the Iraq war. With its special combination of qualitative and quantitative methods it is somewhat unique in that the quantitative analysis provides the in-depth interpretations of the “ideal subject”, whose grief is firmly apolitical in this commodity format.

Christine Lane’s study of the fiction movie *Fligplane* (2005) is another fascinating chapter on how American popular culture has dealt with the traumatic 9/11 experiences in relation to established ideological patterns of identity and history. By comparing thematically affiliated films from the 1930s and the 1960s, she can even show that a feministic perspective tends to give the post 9/11-discourses a new dimension at the latter period.

Karen J. Hall’s study of war porn on the Internet is alarming. Maybe not only because her findings indicate that cyberspace harbours discourses of hate, anti-empathy and fascist ideology, which is well-known. But her focus however is on the U.S. authorities’ reluctance to effectively stop online dissemination of action and torture images that clearly violate international law and human rights. Such passivity seems to encourage citizen to adopt ways of seeing U.S. war crimes as legitimate, even beyond what state propaganda is allowed to do.

In part II the book presents two chapters that provide the reader with some glimpses of the “real face of war”, meaning the actual cruelties acted out in the battlefields and in the torture chambers. But also, in Usha Zacharias’ chapter, of how the public opinion in

Reviewer: **Stig A. Nohrstedt**, Professor Emeritus at Örebro University.

democracies is pacified by a narrative of the “sleeping decent citizen”, that will eventually make things right again when learning about the war crimes. This myth, which also media critics such as Chomsky and Herman for example have lent toward, hides a much more serious reality, according to Zacharias, of systematic violations of human rights and international laws combined with promotion of an imperial citizenship, i.e. citizens that see their democratic role as being patriots, whatever “exceptional” methods or ways of war that the political leaders urge necessary.

Stephanie Athey takes an even closer look at how torture has been discursively constructed after 9/11 in two genres – news and legal writing – based on an analysis of the collectively organised ways that torture have been applied by U.S. authorities. In contrast to the archetypical setting of a single interrogator that questions and threatens an individual suspect, Athey shows that torture as used by the U.S.A. among other countries in reality is systematically institutionalized and collectively implemented in superior neglect of human rights and laws – something completely missing in the two genres studied, and even in discourses where torture is criticized.

Tina Wasserman’s chapter on the Israeli journalist Amira Hass is another highlight in the book. Hass has made a remarkable career as a journalist with a Jewish background, who has worked and lived for several years in the Gaza Strip and in Ramallah on the West Bank. In her analysis Wasserman emphasises the extremely complicated communicative situation in such a conflict, marked both by double-sided traumas (on the Israeli side the holocaust and on the Palestinian side the Nakba, i.e. occupation and deportation) and in addition the inter-generational identity markers used on both sides when mobilizing their peoples for a “politics of return”. Trauma theory helps sorting out some of the devastating consequences in the situation diagnosed as “post traumatic state disorder”, and hopefully also for how to take steps toward conflict resolution in spite of conflicting identities centred around historical memories of sufferings and injustice.

Nico Carpentier’s own chapter takes up the Dreyfus affair and its discursive repercussions in films, in particular a U.S. film from 1937. It is not self-evident how it fits into a book with the subtitle “Perspectives on War”. However, if the analytical frame is extended to post-war discourses and identity constructions, the relevance is indisputable. By applying a number of conceptual tools, such as ‘organic crisis’, ‘moral panics’, ‘cultural trauma’, ‘empty signifiers’ and ‘discursive dislocation’, Carpentier offers a two-eyed perspective, first on the Dreyfus affair as it is played out historically and results in dislocations of hegemonic ideological structures in the 1890s political landscape of France, and second on how this ideological struggle is represented in a number of filmic representations of the affair with a special focus on the U.S. production *The Life of Emile Zola* from 1937, including reviews at the time. Here the main character portrayed on the screen – as the title indicates – is not primarily Dreyfus, but his main intellectual defender, Zola the author of the public appeal “J’accuse”. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that when the Dreyfus affair is culturally deployed to the U.S.A. in late 1930s the hero is an individual male character struggling with the dark, ignorant masses driven by irrational thoughts and motives, whereas the real-historical anti-Dreyfusards’ main ideological node, i.e. patriotism, is rather absent in the film. Having said that, the chapter would also be well placed in a course book as a prototype for analysing conflict and war propaganda when it comes to discursive transformations of historical events, being it traumas, proclaimed ‘just wars’ or glorified victories.

The studies in this book generally have a more sophisticated approach than a simple comparison of “the war in reality” with “the mediated war”, i.e. war as reported by the media. The cultural studies rarely engage with the “culture of war”, including practices, manners and norms, and this goes for this volume too – in spite of the quote from the editor above. But in a way the chapters by Zacharias and Athey in the second part give the reader both the sinister realities of what man is capable

of doing against his and her fellow man – for example when it comes to torture – at the same time as they offer in-depth analyses of the identity-construction mechanisms during wars as an interplay between discourses on individual as well as mediated levels.

The usual Western bias of the selection of studies is somewhat disappointing; what the field needs more than anything is more of global perspectives that especially address the inter-cultural aspects of conflict communication. Far less than ever is the Anglo-Saxon world equal to the entire planet. Only two of the chapters have glimpses of such aspects. Marc Lafleur in his study of two exhibition events 2005, in commemoration of the atomic bombs (sic!) dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, mentions how ordinary American visitors reacted when a Japanese female survivor from Hiroshima told about her traumatic experiences of trying to recover and live with 80 per cent burn. The other chapter is Wasserman's study of the Israeli journalist Amira Hass in which the inter-cultural dimensions is touched upon because of the object of her study.

Even if the U.S. cultural context is of particular importance globally, due to the super-power position, one cannot today after the so-called war on terror was waged as response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks reduce the relevant

terrain to Western cultures without being generally irrelevant for the field of war studies.

Another, minor, critical comment is that it is surprising that the editor contends that previous media war studies “neglected ideology and representation” (p.12). It is easy to find examples to the contrary. Suffice is to mention a few standard works: the Glasgow University Media Group that found that news reporting was more or less “industrial ideology production” (More Bad News 1980: 402); Noam Chomsky & Edward Herman's *The Political Economy of Human Rights* vol I-II (1979) in which “Western ideology” and “state ideology” are central concepts; the same authors' elaboration of a ‘propaganda model’ in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) where a fifth filter is the “ideology of anti-communism” (p. 29); Douglas Kellner writes with a special bearing on visual representations of so-called surgical warfare in *The Persian Gulf War* (1992) about how the “media could not resist falling prey to the images and ideology of technowar.” (p. 162). Of course it can be argued that those and other earlier studies in many ways simplified the complex and subtle meaning-creating processes that critical discourse analyses and cultural studies have exposed more recently, but to attack straw men is no wiser in academic than in other – more violent – battles.