

**REPRESENTING WARS FROM 1860 TO THE PRESENT:
FIELDS OF ACTION, FIELDS OF VISION**

Claire Bowen and Catherine Hoffmann, eds.
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NIEVES DE MINGO IZQUIERDO

Universidad a Distancia de Madrid
mariadelasnieves.demingo@udima.es

201

War, as the saddest manifestation of human interaction, features heavily in a vast array of art products, both popular and highbrow, and it has progressively elbowed its way into Academia. In this sense, some of the most fruitful critical perspectives deal with *war as representation* and, conversely, *the representation of war*, a word game introducing interesting issues and viewpoints in relation to the theatrical character of war and the manifold narratives derived from it. The conception of war as performance has recently been addressed, among others, by Jestrovic (2013), Greenbaum (2015), and Mantoan (2018) and it is visible in a number of representations of conflict which have evolved from the static nature of paintings of battles fought in the distance to the extreme dynamism of TV news or private videos shared through social networks which, according to Baudrillard, have turned spectators into “hostages of media intoxication” (1995: 25). In addition, there is an impressive number of volumes on war as depicted by TV, films, literature or photography, among other art genres (Paris 2007; McLoughlin 2011; Carrabine 2018; Flanagan 2019).

Representing Wars from 1860 to the Present: Fields of Action, Fields of Vision, edited by Claire Bowen and Catherine Hoffman, presents a collection of analyses of multidisciplinary and multicultural perceptions of war as both depicted and mediated by authors and artistic formats alike, the latter ranging from literature or documentary, to film or urban sculpture, thus demonstrating the multi-layered

quality of the phenomenon. Neither the choice of the publishers, nor the title of the volume nor the structure of the sections is trivial. Brill is an established publishing house specialising in academic works mostly in the field of Humanities, a large number of them dealing with war-related issues. In addition, the conflicts that defined the world in the twentieth century, to which we are still in some way indebted, are rooted in the last decades of the previous century (Judt 2005: 4) as continuity clearly underlies historical rupture (Jackson 2005: 6). Similarly, the four sections labelled and arranged according to the vision/action dichotomy entail both passive and active agency on the part of the various focalisers implied by the different narratives studied. These four sections ultimately rotate around two main issues: the theatrical character of war and the distancing mechanism operating between war and its chroniclers.

The first section, “The Spectacle of War”, includes Monica Michlin’s study of the deconstruction of the spectacle of war through three American films about the Iraq War that challenged the audience’s mediated conceptions of the conflict. By means of technical alienating effects that stress their character of artifice, they present the trauma of war from different conflicting points of view, resulting in disturbance and fragmentation. Sandrine Lascaux focuses on the pictorial character of Juan Benet’s narrative in *Herrumbrosas Lanzas* (1983) and his use of different descriptive devices to create a juxtaposed game of images employed to portray fictional events allegedly mirroring real ones, namely, the Spanish Civil War. Clément Sigalas explores the concept of war as spectacle in a bunch of French post-war novels dealing this time with a limited field of vision as defined by liminal elements such as windows and, especially, balconies. Beyond the concept of liminality being particularly productive for literary analysis (Dass 2013; Decker and Winchock 2017; Jacobson et al. 2018), these spaces are analysed as privileged vantage points from which to observe an armed conflict which provoked deep clashes in French society at that time.

“At a Distance from War” is the title of the second section, which digs into the multiple meanings of distance in relation to war, implying both physical and intellectual detachment from the conflict and achieved, in turn, through different mechanisms (Favret 2010; Porter 2015). However, although apparently absent, war can be read between the lines, thus proving the ineffectiveness of any distancing stance. Catherine Hoffmann provides an analysis of William Gerhardie’s novels on the Allied intervention in Russia right before the end of World War I to supply anti-Bolshevik armies with arms and equipment. Humour and indirectness are the distancing mechanisms chosen by Gerhardie to eventually define the Allied expedition as a comic opera. Teresa Gibert studies the pervasive presence of war in Margaret Atwood’s narratives by arranging the author’s works along two different

axes: temporal, useful for recalling past conflicts and predicting future ones, and gendered, as women are on many occasions the focalisers of the narrative— as studied by Wibben (2016), among others. Finally, Catherine Collins considers the narrative quality of memorial sites placed in different locations of the United States to commemorate the internment of the Japanese-American population during World War II. These memorials, erected to counteract the terrible consequences of carrying the motif of ‘the enemy within’ to the extreme, are artistic representations of trauma, imbued with a semantic quality based on their specific locations and the symbols related to Japanese culture.

The third section, “Bringing the War Home”, delves still further into the concept of distance from war as either officially instigated and manipulated, ideologically impossible or geographically conflictive. Eliane Elmaleh analyses a series of photomontages of the Vietnam and Iraq wars by the American artist Martha Rosler. Through contraposed images of shocking war scenes and nice home interiors, Rosler defies the alleged remoteness of the conflicts, opposing the officially commodified concept of war as alien. Marie-France Courriol opens the apparently limited lens of a civil conflict, the Spanish Civil War, and describes the use of documentary as a tool for propaganda, analysing two examples intended to support both sides involved, also stressing the irregular reaction of international audiences due to the limited scope of these pieces as persuasive propaganda, for they only reinforced the public’s preconceptions. Christopher Lloyd reviews Jean Lartéguy’s historicized fiction of the unfruitful secession of South-Katanga from Congo immediately after its independence from Belgium. Permeated by postcolonial echoes of Achebe’s reading of Conrad, the analysis stresses the clashing positions which clearly inform the distancing mechanism operating at different levels. The conflict passed unnoticed in Western countries but it was just one of the multiple wars marking the birth of a nation. In this last case, distancing from war was impossible. Lastly, Claire Bowen examines the way in which, by using storytelling, official and media discourses contributed to constructing a war narrative around the killing of a lance corporal and his service dog in Afghanistan in 2011. The Foucauldian concept of truth dominates the media manipulation of the bare facts of a story which was repeated ad nauseam. In bringing the soldier and his dog home for their burial, war was also brought to British homes but through a deeply sentimental and politically biased account which was eventually counterproductive even for the military.

“Experiencing War and Bearing Witness” is the title of the fourth section, which features three contributions dealing with war accounts using two different artistic formats. William Gleeson studies the collections of American Civil War photographs focusing on absence and silence, considering what is not present and, therefore,

unsaid in the photographs and always taking into account that our view is not innocent as it is influenced by our own image of current wars. Guillaume Muller analyses Hayashi Fusao's collection of war accounts of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Fusao's vision is clearly overwhelmed by events and, despite his attempts at distancing from the actual conflict, war did exist around and outside him, which resulted in a metanarrative game since, according to Muller, for Fusao "writing about war becomes writing about himself writing about the war" (207). The last contribution to both the section and the book has been aptly chosen by the editors: Misako Nemoto's study of Ōoka Shōhei's autobiographical narration of both forced drafting and conflict witnessing. The author's field of vision is an attempt to understand the futility of war, and the distancing mechanism chosen, an objectification of his own self, a separation between a narrative and a narrator whose experience is diluted by the thousands of similar experiences of others like him.

The volume reviewed in these lines intends to articulate a series of analyses of war as something experienced, perceived and, ultimately, depicted by arranging the variety of contributions it includes under different labels, irrespective of the artistic genre they refer to, which has been a particularly fruitful decision of the editors. Although literature may appear to predominate in the collection, this is a misleading perception. An almost even balance between narrative and other artistic domains is present. However, other possible contributions from different literary genres such as theatre or poetry would have completed the whole panorama. Similarly, reflections on war displayed by painting or the graphic novel would have been welcome in order to offer a wider vision of a by no means monolithic phenomenon.

204

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