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Mediating War and Identity: Figures of Transgression in 20th- and 21st-century War Representation

Book

Accepted Version

Introduction

Purse, L. and Wölfel, U. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9556-536X, eds. (2020) Mediating War and Identity: Figures of Transgression in 20th- and 21st-century War Representation. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 1-13. ISBN 9781474446266 Available at https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/94833/

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Publisher: Edinburgh University Press

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Lisa Purse and Ute Wölfel

Conflict and war are constitutive. They shape and reshape international, intercultural and bodily territories, and shift how people feel about themselves and others. As Edward Said famously pointed out, twentieth-century human relations were structured by 'imaginative geograph[ies] and histor[ies]' of difference and distance (2003 [1978]: 55) rooted in a colonial fear of the other. Derek Gregory argues convincingly that public debate and thus public feeling about war's prospect, its spectacle and its consequences are still organised by such 'architectures of enmity', using as his case study the post-9/11 military campaigns of the US, Israel and Britain in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq, which 'turned on the cultural construction of their opponents as outsiders' (2004: 17, 28). In this way, as Christine Sylvester explains, war becomes a 'social institution', shaped by the relationship of fears, experiences and emotions to 'the prescribed war scripts' that dictate who are designated heroes and villains, victims and perpetrators in a particular geopolitical and historical moment (2013: 4, 6).

Cultural representation occupies an ambiguous position in relation to conflict and war. On the one hand, it can be weaponised. Audiovisual rhetoric can be deployed to persuade and reinforce state-sponsored or dominant cultural 'war scripts', to reinforce normative perceptions of who constitutes friend and foe, and how they should be treated. Judith Butler notes the extent to which this weaponisation often elides as much as it shows: 'states or other war perpetrators' seek 'to control the visual and narrative dimensions of war ... delimit[ing] public discourse by establishing and disposing the sensuous parameters of reality itself ' (2010: xi). On the other hand, cultural representation can be a space for counter- narratives to emerge, for thought and emotion to be provoked differently. And despite cinema's long history as a tool in the propaganda machinery of warfaring groups, Michael Shapiro (2009) argues that this is a cultural form which can also operate to bring spectators back from controlled narratives to the complexities and tensions of the real. Shapiro reaches back to Siegfried Kracauer's idea of cinema as an experiential encounter with 'things in their concreteness' rather than their abstraction (Kracauer 1960: 296), Walter Benjamin's description of cinema's capacity to invite the spectator into the 'position of a critic' (Benjamin 1968: 228), and Jacques Rancière's more recent assertion that cinema can disrupt 'the human tendency to place oneself at "the center of the universe of images"' (Shapiro 2009: 5, quoting Rancière 2006: 111), to argue for cinema as a privileged site at which conflict and its ramifications can be addressed: 'The worlds of pain, suffering, and grievance remain readily available for reflection and renegotiation' (2009: 155).

In this book, we look at those figures who sit in uncomfortable relation to architectures of enmity and prescribed war scripts; those figures who don't 'fit' dominant or state-sponsored narratives about war, either by accident or design; those figures who transgress the borders between 'us' and 'them', enemy and friend, perpetrator and victim. We call these 'figures of transgression', and we identify them as a crucial ingredient in cultural productions that seek to understand conflict and war and their aftermath, to reflect on dominant narratives about who wages war and why, and on its consequences for people, communities and nations. We examine their cultural function as a specific locus at which contested or competing ideas about war are aired and interrogated. Sharing Shapiro's view of the importance of cinema as a site for productive thought, we con- sider the occurrence of figures of transgression using the mass medium of cinema as our primary case study, but also signal how such an examination could be productively broadened out to other forms of cultural production by including case studies on television and the museum. The book looks at figures of transgression in relation to particular conflicts, to show how these figures often operate as a key site for 'reflection and renegotiation' of dominant 'war scripts' about collective injury, loss, violence, culpability and post-conflict national identity.

It is also important to acknowledge that this book emerges at a present moment mired in conflict's contemporary manifestations and its legacies from history, a moment at which political and social positions are expressed increasingly in terms of polarisation and opposition, public debate seems to find little common ground, and debates about national identity are equally polarised and often protectionist. This is the era of US President Donald Trump and his isolationist approaches to immigration, war and international trade; of the resurgence of right-wing leaders and nationalist, populist movements in Europe and elsewhere; of domestic and extraterritorial attacks on journalists and democratic elections; and of a climate denialism whose vigour matches that of the climate protesters seeking to encourage leaders to address impending ecological disaster. This is the era of 'fake news' in which the rhetoric of injury, treachery and betrayal is frequently deployed by both right- and left-wing politicians and commentators. At such a moment, it is crucial to continue to argue for nuanced critical thinking, and to identify and celebrate those aspects of cultural production that encourage reflection, thought and an empathetic, inclusive attitude to others. It is in this spirit that we have brought together this collection of essays, and it is in this spirit that we have chosen to focus on the figure who declines easy or fixed positions within the public negotiation of war and conflict: the figure of transgression.

Transgression in a Polarised Present

As a frame for the articles that follow, some reflection is necessary on the ways in which the idea of transgression has gained currency in the contemporary

moment. For Chris Jenks, transgression is 'to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment, the law or the convention'; it is 'that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries' (2003: 2). Jenks describes transgression as a 'deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation' (ibid.), an act that 'does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus complements them' (ibid.: 7). The radical potential of transgression can often be curtailed, precisely because transgressors, 'through their remarked differences . . . work to firm up the boundaries which give form and substance to the conceptual categories from which they are excluded' (ibid.: 185). Writing in 2003, Jenks situates the concept's importance in relation to the destabilisation of a shared social contract that he argues defines the late capitalist, postmodernist period, and the concomitant drive to exceed limits that characterises globalisation, tech- nologisation and individualism in the twenty-first century (ibid.: 4–8). Yet the importance of the concept of transgression to geopolitics in particular, including war and conflict, cannot be understated. Transgression is often deployed as the designation for all who are not the category 'us', architectures of enmity dictating political rhetoric in particularly sharp ways around military action, its justification, initiation and aftermath.

Transgression can be dangerous, challenging accepted allegiances, disturbing dominant hierarchies, contesting received wisdom and asserted certainties, shining a light on and at the same time questioning the very core of authority that victory and even survival seems to depend on. As a result, in highly polarised contexts, the idea of transgression is invoked in public and political rhetoric in ways that sometimes very purposefully point away from transgression's actual radical potential. A much-discussed example is the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the US on 11 September 2001. The attacks precipitated a strident reiteration of the self/other binary: then-President George Bush Jnr's 2001 State of the Union address following the terrorist attacks made clear that, in his words, 'Either you are with us or with the terrorists' (Bush 2001: 69). This assertion categorised as transgressive any person who did not wholly embrace US domestic and foreign policy post-9/11, and in doing so purposefully obscured those who might seek to question the direction of government and military policy in the ensuing years.[1] More recently, social transgressions such as racist, homophobic, ableist and misogynist rhetoric and xenophobic nationalist discourse have been brandished by populist politicians to signal their authenticity and readiness to take action, and thus shore up their conservative world view, including Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Vik- tor Orbán in Hungary and Narendra Modi in India (see, for example, Winberg 2017). In this way, transgression can be radical or normative in its relationship with the 'norms' it transgresses, while the fixities it challenges are equally open to instability, contestation and renegotiation.

In the above brief examples, the deployment of and suppression of trans- gression is used to political ends. It is often tied to nationalist discourse, with the

invocation of an idea of protecting the national interest, frequently steeped in a romanticisation of past conflicts and conquests and of the motherland or fatherland. This has, for example, characterised the public and political discourse around Britain's decision to leave the EU. From the 2016 referendum campaign and vote onwards, to Boris Johnson's election campaign in 2019 (the centrepiece of which was a commitment to 'get Brexit done'), pro-Leave commentators and politicians mobilised a set of slogans that emphasised sovereignty, territory and control of borders and laws, and characterised the UK as under threat from border transgressions by migrants and European bureaucrats. Moreover, the referendum result produced a polarisation of society predominantly along age and education lines in which both pro-Brexit and pro-EU contingents named each other as transgressors: pro-Brexit commentators and citizens were accused of the transgressions of racism and ignorance while pro-EU commentators and citizens were accused of the transgressions of fearmongering and unpatriotic sentiment (Norris and Inglehart 2019). The sudden strict divide thus activated transgression as a priority concept in the battle about political power.

Transgression exists as an act, a breaking of a demarcated norm, rule or law, but at the same time it is an interpretation of an act which might not be a conscious rule-breaking but is perceived and categorised as such. Extreme and polarised situations reinforce rules and laws per se, what is permitted and prohibited behaviour. In such situations both the breaking of a law or rule and the perceived breaking of one are commonly linked to 'treason', to the giving away of the country to the enemy. The term 'treason' here serves as a loose category summarising all severe forms of transgression, that is those judged (by the categoriser) as hostile or adverse in their effect on the national interest. In the current political climate of growing division, 'treason' has acquired the status of a war cry (Krischer 2019). Thus in the wake of the Brexit referendum, in which 48 per cent of voters sought to remain in the EU, and 52 per cent sought to leave, Brexit supporters charged Remainers (who were still campaigning to stay in the EU) with 'betraying the people' and 'giving away the country'; exemplary in this respect was the demand of the Tory MEP David Campbell Bannerman to try 'extreme EU loyalty' for treason (Chakelian 2018). In the US, those who defy President Trump are routinely accused of the same. House Intelligence chairman Adam Schiff and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, both key to Trump's impeachment inquiry and sub- sequent impeachment, have been explicitly accused by Trump of 'treason' (Elfrink 2019: n.p.), while National Security Advisor to Trump, John Bolton, who has written a book which allegedly links Trump to the Ukraine scandal (in which Trump is accused of withholding aid to Ukraine to persuade them to find evidence of misconduct on the son of potential Democrat opponent Joe Biden) is called a 'traitor' (Dawsey et al. 2020: n.p.).

The relation of such accusations to the legislative frameworks of particular countries can be distant to say the least, but the socio-cultural frameworks of media reporting, political allegiance and lived experience in which they circulate

is significant. Schiff, Pelosi and Bolton have not committed treason according to US law, but Trump supporters hear the language of treason and have their commitment to Trump emotion- ally reinforced as a result. In a similar way, Edward Snowden, who as a CIA subcontractor leaked highly classified National Security Agency information to reveal the extent of government surveillance in the US and elsewhere in 2013, was frequently accused of treason by politicians and commentators. Ex-CIA chief James Woolsey and Republican Mike Pompeo both suggested that the 'traitor' Snowden should receive a death sentence because the leaks hampered intelligence capability (McLaughlin 2015: n.p.; Kasperowicz 2016: n.p.). Yet these assertions are at odds with the criminal charges brought. As André Krischer points out:

> The question of whether Snowden really committed treason in the legal sense of the American constitution has been widely discussed and differently answered. The criminal prosecution authorities did not take up the charge – they have charged Snowden for espionage. However, that doesn't change the point that for many Americans Snowden is a 'traitor' at least in the moral sense. (Krischer 2019: 7)[2]

Notably these categorisations of Snowden as a traitor emerge during a period of increased threat perception, a product of an uptick in domes- tic US and European terrorist activity, and sustained threat rhetoric from politicians (Woolsey's comments were made in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks).

Transgression, War and Cultural Representation

Krischer notes that '[c]oncepts of treason also imply scenarios of highest danger and collective threat' (ibid.), a moment most palpable in war. In military conflict and war as well as their beginnings and aftermaths, the figures of such 'existential' transgressions are usually the deserter, the conscientious objector, the actual traitor, the mutineer or others disobeying orders, such as the pacifist, the coward or the pillager. To label such figures as traitors simply because of their disengagement from what Sarah Cole has called the 'organizing oppositions of war' (2009: 27) marks them with highly negative connotations; for example, in Roman law treason was understood not to just damage but indeed destroy the community (Krischer 2019: 20), and the more recent reactions to Snowden's actions reveal the extent to which this meaning adheres. Audiovisual media that depict transgression in a military conflict or pre- or post-conflict setting catches these heightened moments and thus offers the opportunity to catalyse or intervene in the wider cultural debates focused on the act of transgression and the figure committing the act.

Film has a status as a significant mass media form in the twentieth century, a popular form which has often been deployed for propaganda purposes, as well as less strident forms of socio-cultural positioning; it continues to be important as a site for negotiations around national identity in the twenty-first century. Not only have cinema's technologies of vision developed alongside the war machine's technologies of vision, but so have concepts of national cinema which emerged with the media-war of the First World War. Cinema as a result has always been

engaged in the documenting and cultural 'processing' of war and its legacies, with the war film being one of the most consistent genres. To illustrate, among the Academy Award nominations of the last five years were *1917* (Sam Mendes, 2019), *Jojo Rabbit* (Taika Waititi, 2019), *Darkest Hour* (Joe Wright, 2017) and *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017), *Hacksaw Ridge* (Mel Gibson, 2016), *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi* (Michael Bay, 2016), *Land of Mine* (Martin Zandvliet, 2015), *A War* (Tobias Lindholm, 2015) and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014). This volume seeks to address that representational history, while acknowledging other visual and audiovisual contexts in which negotiations of transgressions generated by war and military conflict have taken place.

This book shines a light on figures of transgression because they are often marginalised in public discussion about war and conflict, yet play key roles in the re-thinking of cultural, national and community identity. Because their acts of transgression take place in extreme circumstances of stress for the whole community, they foreground the foundations of that community and offer them to scrutiny; in particular they raise questions of agency, moral responsibility and culpability. Even under severe circum- stances such as war where an act of transgression may break a rule in the legal sense, transgression retains its characteristic as fundamentally and foremost an im/moral act (Parikh 2009; Jervis 1999; Åkerström 1991). These figures, and their cultural representations, may be marginalised, but their moral challenge serves as a site of intense public debate and negotiations. Transgression is, as Jenks reminds us, 'a touchstone of social relations' (ibid.: 33) and throws into the light the relation between centre and periphery, included and excluded, self and other.

Using an interdisciplinary lens that accommodates analysis of the narratives that frame these figures and their audiovisual depiction on the one hand, and analysis of the socio-cultural, political and historical context in which they emerge on the other, this book sets out to understand the com- plex function of transgressors in representations of war, and seeks to map a history of forms of identity negotiation linked to these figures. Within this process, we understand the figures of transgression to be 'rather a dynamic force of cultural reproduction' (Jenks 2003: 7); their analysis will help the reader to better comprehend how military conflict and cultural change intersect.

The book brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to understand the variety of mechanisms and connections that link military conflict, cultural change and cultural representation. With the focus on conflicts from the First World War to the 'war on terror', we look at the functions of figures of transgression as part of a wider cultural preoccupation with the connotations and consequences of acts of 'border crossing'. We argue that these figures operate as a crucial site for culturally vital pro- cesses of 'thinking through' architectures of enmity as complex processes of identity formation. We claim that the representation of transgression in war and military conflict is never just a question of showing

illegal or im/moral acts but of exposing their wider social meaning linked to class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, political conviction and their role on the 'national stage' where the collective negotiates values.

The volume begins with representations of figures of transgression in the First World War from the interwar years to the present. The liminal space which conscientious objectors, pacifists, protesters, mutineers or alien nationals in occupied territories held with regard to the law as well as public perception has been used to negotiate the basis on which the national collective is founded in terms of territory, allies, class and voice, as well as gender. Applying different approaches to the minority position of the transgressors, the chapters describe strategies of othering and exclusion of the transgressor from national narratives of heroism, cohesion and homogeneity, but equally explore constellations that have opened up the traditional and often routinised stories of the nation to include the transgressors and their objection/antagonism. Claudia Sternberg's chapter on cultural representations of Edith Cavell offers an intriguing study of transgression as potential and as part of the rule. Taking the myth of Edith Cavell – the young and innocent nurse slaughtered by the 'relentless enemy' – as her starting point, Sternberg focuses on an early film adaptation, Wilcox's *Dawn* (UK, 1928), as an interpretation which actualised the figure's potential to transgress the very lines that have elsewhere confined her within narratives of British heroism and virtuousness vis-à-vis the German 'Hun'. Centrally, it was the rewriting of gender assumptions which permitted the film to question the national self-definition and politically polarised war narrative the figure of Cavell had – and has since – historically reinforced.

Sternberg's discussion of a momentary narrative shift to include the transgressive acts finds a complement in Rebecca Dolgoy's chapter on the Imperial War Museum's presentation of conscientious objectors, soldier- poets and their protest, and Irish Republicans. Dolgoy traces the curatorial strategies which stifle the perspective of the transgressive other in one exhibition while celebrating it in another, which allow, at least temporarily, the simultaneity of 'contesting narratives'. In both chapters, the situational specificity of transgression becomes palpable with regard to processes of historical re-evaluation of the act of transgression, linked to changing frames of interpretation but also of categorisation – that is, who is designated as a transgressor and for what transgressions at particular points in history. While it seems possible to include middle-class protest against the First World War's violence and futility to a point and celebrate conscientious objection in the context of the peace movement (though not in the context of the British war effort), Dolgoy highlights the difficulty in representing those acts defying the very territorial core of political self- understanding as Empire. Cultural and political shifts emerging around figures of transgression are often not permanent but resemble momentary visions of moral sympathy beyond self-entrenchment.

Impermanence is characteristic also of the continuous re-framing of deserters, mutineers and conscientious objectors in the British television productions analysed by Emma Hanna. The chapter follows small-screen productions from the 1960s to the 2010s and reveals the changing attitudes towards transgressors across that timeframe, ranging from their complete absence from representations of the First World War in early examples, to providing a perspective for rewriting the earlier war story, through to attempting to contain anew their transgressive potential. Hanna's over- view reveals how closely the interpretation of the transgressor as either a destructive or productive force is linked to shifts in, for example, political questions of class justice but also concepts of historiography.

As a figure of negotiation within and beyond the collective, transgressors can play key roles in the aftermath of conflicts. The chapters on representations of transgressors following the Second World War explore the function that on-screen acts of transgression have to mediate the position of Germany as a morally defeated nation. Ute Wölfel's chapter looks at recent feature films about the re-émigré, jurist and attorney general Dr Fritz Bauer, whose efforts to confront the German majority with the atrocities committed, supported or condoned by Germans were perceived by many as a treacherous attack on the collective's self-definition as 'victim' of the war. While people like Bauer did successfully initiate a political and moral transformation, their representations still reveal resentment about the historical challenge which at the time questioned core notions of the self.

The transgressor as a much needed and yet distrusted mediator is central also to Patrick Major's contribution on the 1951 co-production *Decision before Dawn* (US, Anatol Litvak). The question of how defeated Germany could recover a sense of moral justice from within, and establish a tradition that would be acceptable to the compromised nation as well as the Allies and the wider world, gave the defector a special role to play. The chapter details the production process and the filmmaker's and producers' decisions, drawing out the difficulties the screen 'defector as mediator' posed to the task of attracting a German audience which could easily vent feelings of 'betrayal', and an American audience, on the other hand, which could fail to see what advantages defecting could bring.

Despite warnings Litvak received about presenting a German defector as a reliable and quite heroic ally of the Americans in 1951, the US have their own tradition of military counternarratives, particularly organised around the figure of the deserter. Thomas Bjerre traces this tradition up to representations of the Iraq War. If the defector in the postwar film asked the question what a 'good' or 'moral' German looks like, the figure of the deserter in the recent *Stop-Loss* (Kimberley Peirce, 2008) helps to pose the question of what a 'good' man is in this fraught context. Bjerre's chapter outlines the tensions between the socially normative ideals of masculinity and their encapsulation and preservation in strictly guarded notions of 'soldierly masculinity' in the face of the traumas of

war. The dictate of the military and masculine ideal exerts highly gendered constraints which shape their perception by society while clashing with the psychological responses of soldiers to war. The figure of transgression offers the opportunity to understand masculinity ideals outside of military confines and their gendered polarisation, though it remains temporary; the national quest of fighting a war in Iraq is reasserted at the film's close, preventing a fundamental undermining of the military or its campaigns.

The challenge war poses to the morally engaged military man is also explored through the figure of the pacifist, as Guy Westwell points out. A rare figure in popular American film due to its questioning of the very necessity and legitimacy of war, the pacifist, when he does appear on screen, is necessarily a religious pacifist. Here pacifism is able to be depicted because it is founded on a historically dominant US faith – Christianity. Westwell's comparison of two Hollywood films that focus on religious pacifism, *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941) and *Hacksaw Ridge* (Mel Gibson, 2017), offers an insight into the reflexivity of transgression as manifested in this uncommon branch of the war film. The films explore the transgressive potential of pacifism, and while it might be easy to see these films as straightforwardly closing down pacifism's threat to the US military project, what emerges instead is a more nuanced picture in which the possibility of alternative ways of thinking about war and its effects are held open.

The final two chapters of the volume open up a different perspective on war and transgression in that they both discuss women whose political and humanitarian engagement with current violent conflicts, notably the Syrian civil war, demonstrate the complexity of transgression as a 'dynamic force in cultural reproduction' (Jenks 2003: 7). In Lisa Purse's chapter on activist mothers in Syria, the proliferation mechanisms of transgression are explored. The political activism of women against the Assad regime, a political transgression, generates the breaking of social norms for women, especially around gendered expectations of behaviour and agency. In the case of *For Sama* (Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, UK/Syria, 2019), a film by a woman 'citizen' filmmaker about life in the war zone, the norms of what western mainstream media is prepared to screen are also trans- gressed by the documentation of the death of children and the pain of their shocked parents. But even where the documentation of the violence does not include the dying and the dead, the transgressive activist mother defies western expectations in terms of private and political endings. For Raghda in *A Syrian Love Story* (Sean McAllister, UK, 2015) fulfilment is not the safety of France and family life, but the continued fight for Syria's freedom.

An acute concern over endings of activist women's lives also drives the chapter by Agnieszka Piotrowska. Like Purse, Piotrowska demonstrates the extent to which professional women's lives are still framed by patriarchal narratives that label them transgressive and unruly when they seek to work outside gendered norms around risk and self-determination. Fittingly for this final chapter of a

book about the potential of transgression, Piotrowska chooses a transgressive form for her own reflections, drawing on feminist autobiographical forms alongside more traditional scholarly discussion to explore these pressing issues. Her memory of the war journalist and friend Marie Colvin, who was murdered in Syria in 2012, and the analysis of Colvin's representations, poses the same urgent question which was broached right at the outset of the anthology, in the first chapter on Edith Cavell: should we give in to the tendency to stifle the transgressor, whose commitment to human(ist) change and the consequent breaking of gender norms undermines social expectations, or can we actualise patterns of disruption in our cultural representations and in our wider social and national lives, to keep the transgressive potential alive and productive?

Notes

1. To read more about this moment of polarised rhetoric, excellent starting points include Roy (2001), Hunt (2002), McAllister (2002), Holloway (2008) and Westwell (2014).

2. Translation by Ute Wölfel.

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