

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Technologies Of Truth And National Trauma: Revisiting The Enola Gay Controversy



It is often said that the close of the forty-four day Gulf War marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. According to then President George Bush, Operation Desert Storm effected the radical transformation of the national political imaginary by finally putting to rest the ghost of Vietnam. According to General Schwarzkopf, leader of the UN alliance, it signified a dramatic revolution in the telos of military engagement along the lines laid down in the Weinberger Doctrine: “we are [no longer] in the business of killing” (Gusterson: 51). And according to Jeffrey Records, a military analyst, it set a wholly new and impossible standard by which all subsequent U.S. military interventions will be measured: “If pre-Desert Storm U.S. military force planning was haunted by the disastrous legacy of Vietnam, post-Desert Storm planning will be plagued by the specter of falling short of the splendid and relatively painless performance of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf in 1991” (Dauber: 158).

Like their fierce ideological opponents, a host of cultural theorists and critics agree that the Gulf War is to be understood as having ushered in new era. However, considerably less than convinced that the operation was as bloodless as the government and media would have the public believe, they claim that Operation Desert Storm delivered not a new kind of warfare but, instead, a new rhetoric of war whose strategically selected images and carefully crafted discourse worked together to literally ‘de-humanize’ the cost of war. In a military conflict between the U.S., its allies, and Iraq that Anthony Giddens has described as “the most heavily mediated, reflexively organized war in human history” (Shaw and Carr-Hill: 2), human suffering and the loss of life that is the inevitable price of war was almost altogether absent. For the general public, these scholars rightly insist, the Gulf War was a war without bodies – a technological exercise executed not by men but by machines whose “surgical” “smart bombs” took out “units” not

enemy soldiers, a war during which, as Paul Virilio terms it, “the aesthetics of disappearance” (11) entailed the violent erasure of both allied forces and enemy casualties alike. In short, with the Gulf War we entered what cultural critic John Taylor has deftly called the era of “‘derealization’, the era when the objects of violence in warfare are grouped together in fields that are rendered abstract” (158) so as to make war appear more humane to the viewing and voting public.

With many others, Elaine Scarry worries the political consequences of this new rhetoric of war. Foremost amongst her concerns is not only that the highly technological character of contemporary warfare will prompt civilians to quickly cede all authority on military matters to the state and its experts but, moreover, that the “exchange of idioms between weapons and bodies” in which the “central inner activity of war comes to be identified as (or described as though it were) ‘disarming’ rather than ‘injuring’” (67) will discourage civilians from thinking seriously about the moral entailments of war and, thus, encourage their support in the future. As George Roeder states the case, a good deal more directly, “The high degree of public approval for the war in the Persian Gulf, with its tightly controlled news coverage, reinforced one of the supposed lessons of the Vietnam War: the more Americans see of a war, the less likely they are to support it” (5). At least on the North American homefront and from the 1990’s onward, less is more.

Although I agree that a dangerous transformation of American political consciousness – regrettable above all else for its, in Scarry’s terms, “infantilization and marginalization” of civilians (67) – is taking place, I am not persuaded that the palpable shift in collective sentiment and the public’s consequent disengagement from public debate in a matter as grave as war can be accounted for only by detecting the singular manner in which the Persian Gulf War as well as subsequent military engagements in Somalia, Serbia and, now, Afghanistan are represented in the various news media. Indeed, as Cori Dauber has astutely noted in one of the few analysis of the news media’s coverage of war during and since Operation Desert Storm that attends carefully to those rare instances in which American audiences were exposed to the embodied, human cost of war (images of the Allied pilots in Iraqi custody, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant in Somali custody, the bodies of American soldiers dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, and the three American soldiers taken prisoner during a patrol on the Macedonia-Kosovo border during the 1999 NATO air war

with Serbia), it may be fallacious for the government and military – and I would add cultural theorists and critics – to assume or conclude that coverage which exposes the embodied horrors of war “would produce undeniable demands for a change in American policy” (667). As Dauber demonstrates, public opinion polls taken after the dramatic Mogadishu debacle clearly indicate otherwise and, in fact, suggest that “images of American and Allied POWs do not necessarily shatter public opinion or will, and might even strengthen it” (664). Furthermore, opinion polls taken over the course of the so-called War Against Terror imply that Americans made a 360-degree attitudinal turn in the nineties; not long ago, widespread and enthusiastic support for an extended engagement that is known to be taking place largely on the ground rather than from the air – a key component of “the aesthetics of disappearance” – was unthinkable.

My purpose here is not to quibble with theorists and critics with whose politics I am generally sympathetic. I do, however, want to suggest that the reading practices which have animated the analyses thus far and, thus, the assumptions that underwrite them, unwittingly short-circuit our ability to grasp that which is fundamentally at stake: what Kenneth Burke might have called the motivational complex of contemporary public and political culture and what Wendy Brown has recently termed “the emotional substructure of [our] political expressions and political formation” (2001: 21). Indeed, it is not without consequence that these analyses (including neo-psychoanalytic or Lacanian, neo-Marxian or Foucauldian, and poststructuralist and postmodern) cohere around one of two, and in some instances both, determining, even if unstated, theoretical-critical coordinates or predicates: a representativist or undeconstructed concept of temporality and of genre that, in the case of the former, makes it possible to introduce a cleft or breach out of which is constituted both a present and a past whose discourses and practices are then taken to be irreducibly different, and in the case of the latter, makes it possible to install a system of syntactic or programmatic rules that determine the effects of particular discourses upon audiences in advance. Both coordinates, of course, are mechanisms of control. A representativist concept of temporality that forecloses on a “now” understood as complex network or weave of protentions and retentions sets the conditions for presentist accounts. An undeconstructed conception of genre that refuses to admit the always already provisional status of formal boundaries and the shifting relation of the universal and the particular, licenses a focus on a single kind of discourse and, hence, sets the stage for the production of unnecessarily reductive or formulaic explanations

of the dynamic relation of texts, audiences and political culture. Speaking particularly to treatments of the recent transformation of American political consciousness and the role the new discourses and imagings of war have played in it, an under-interrogated conception of temporality, signaled by the declaration and presumption of a “new era,” has unduly simplified and limited our critical depth of field, thereby blinding us to the complex ways in which the discursively and retroactively constituted past collaborates in the constitution of the so-called present. Out of the stubborn insistence of generic classifications – namely, media coverage or news reportage and the administrative rhetorics embedded therein, on the one hand, and cultural texts on the other, between the poetic and prosaic, the world-disclosing and problem-solving – has emerged critical analyses whose over-investment in the actual or promissory power of this single technology of truth is premised on the premature discounting of others. Here I want to be very clear. I am not advocating, to borrow Habermas’s terms, “a leveling” of either temporal or genre distinctions (1987: 185) but, rather, recommending that we seek out their points of imbrication, articulation, indeed collusion, so that we may be better able to assess and address the political disposition and its entailments that characterize our re-militarized, re-patriotized, and re-masculinized age.

Although it may be a coincidence, it is not without consequences that the visual and verbal “derealization” of war in news reports is taking place alongside its hyper-realization in blockbuster movies, made-for-television docudramas and mini-series, best selling autobiographies and memoirs, and museum exhibits that are, with striking regularity, about World War II. From Steven Spielberg’s Academy-award winning *Saving Private Ryan* (whose twenty-five minutes of meticulously chronicled mass slaughter on Omaha Beach are credited with having set new standards for realistic film-making) to HBO’s *Band of Brothers* (a subsequent Spielberg-Hanks collaboration aired in September of 2001 that Christopher McEvoy, writing for the popular press, calls a “daringly adapted... story” in which “there is no shortage of artillery blasts, separated limbs, head wounds, and morphine injections, which usually precede a soldier’s death” [2001]) to the similarly stylized *Enemy at the Gate*, *Pearl Harbor* and, most recently, *Windtalkers*; from Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* and its multiple spin-offs, including his 2002 documorial, *The Price of Freedom*, to Time/Life’s *Our Finest Hour*, from *Schindler’s List* to the collection of discourses as well as still and moving images that are the National Holocaust Memorial

Museum on the Mall, embodiment is the central conceit. In every case, it is through bodies – allied bodies and enemy bodies, whole bodies and severed bodies, dead bodies and live bodies, well-fed bodies and hungry bodies, bodies that are clean and dirty, strong and weak, young and old – that meaning is made. However, to claim that the meaning or message of these texts is largely made manifest through an aesthetics of hyper-embodiment is to fall considerably short of accounting for their rhetorical force or effectivity, a somewhat clunky but useful term used to designate the effects of discourses, images and practices that extend well beyond the production of meaning by virtue of their relationship to formations whose elements have no essential relation. How, then, are we to understand the relation of these concurrent and seemingly diametrically opposed discourses of war? And what is their cumulative effect? Operating in tandem, albeit at some distance apart, what kind of rhetorical work is being done?

An answer to these questions begins to emerge through a critical interrogation of the *one* exception to the rule or rein of hyper-embodiment that gives shape to this cultural assemblage. In contrast to all of the other rehabilitations of WWII since the early 1970s when it fell out of favor and, thus, disappeared from the public cultural scene, only the short-lived but none the less notorious 1995 *Enola Gay Exhibit* at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum breaks with convention by substituting the aesthetic of disappearance or derealization for the aesthetic of hyper-embodiment. This was, without question, a very deliberate act. Indeed, on January 30, 1995 and at the bequest of eighty-one members of Congress, the Air Force Association and the American Legion, Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman cancelled the National Air and Space Museum's planned fiftieth anniversary exhibit of the historic flight of the *Enola Gay*. Coupled with the cancellation of "The Last Act," conceptualized under Martin Harwit's directorship, was the promise that another exhibit would open in its place, one that would take away from its stillborn predecessor a simple but significant rhetorical lesson in the art of museum display: exhibits must be timely *and* appropriate. Although, according to Heyman, the director and curators of the original exhibit had rightly recognized that the fiftieth anniversary of the *Enola Gay*'s historical flight was a particularly opportune moment to unveil the restored B-29 Superfortress, they had tragically misunderstood how to do so in a manner befitting the occasion. As the Secretary put it at his press conference that day:

We made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use

of atomic weapons with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war. . . . Veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke (Harwit: 435, reported in newspapers the following day).

Holding true to his word, an exhibit titled simply "The Enola Gay" opened in June 1995.

If about nothing else, there was one point about which all parties embroiled in the extended controversy over how to display the Enola Gay in the nation's single most frequented museum could agree: namely, that the differences between Harwit's "The Last Act" and Heyman's "The Enola Gay" were differences that mattered. Unlike Harwit's six part exhibition that would have staged, according to the final script, the movement from "the ferocity of the last year of the war in Asia [to] the development of the bomb [to] the unfolding imperatives behind the U.S. decision to use the weapon against Japan [to] preparation for the Enola Gay mission ... [to] the human consequences of the bombs in [Hiroshima and Nagasaki], and [finally to] the nuclear legacy to the post-war world" (Dower, 338), Heyman's surrogate exhibit had only two parts: a meticulous, step-by-step, chronicle of the Superfortress's renovation followed by a noticeably less meticulous recounting of the production and deployment of the bomber. In addition to its scope, self-anointed "conscientious objectors" to Heyman's exhibit fought voraciously with the director, curators, and consultants over the inclusion or exclusion of estimations of the human price of both a massive U.S. invasion undertaken in the Pacific and a nuclear explosion; original documents, including statements from Eisenhower, Leahy, Wallace and Truman, demonstrating a reluctance, on both tactical and moral grounds, to deploy the bomb as well as a July 17, 1945 petition penned by several Manhattan Project scientists imploring the President to "consider the moral responsibilities" of dropping the bomb and to entertain the possibility of doing so only after Japan had been given both a warning and "an opportunity to surrender" (Harwit, 234); photographs of and personal objects recovered at ground zero, most notably, images of women and children as well as a child's metal lunchbox that contained the charred remains of rice and beans; and a wall mural that visually documented the proliferation of nuclear warheads along with accompanying script that closed with the statement, "The [nuclear] dilemma is not about to disappear."

What are we to make of Heyman's surrogate and bifurcated exhibit that, by nearly all bipartisan accounts, enacts the displacement of a visual and verbal rhetoric of historical inquiry, punctuated by instances of ethical and political open-endedness or undecidability and executed through an aesthetics of hyper-embodiment, by a visual and verbal rhetoric of technological progress and aesthetic of derealization, staged first as a magnificent renovation narrative and second as success story about American scientific innovation? A vast number of responses to the exhibit were made public, but all generally fall out along two lines. On the one side, Heyman's exhibit was regarded as populist victory for the nation and a strong sign, as New Gingrich put it to the National Governor's Association, of "a reassertion and renewal of American civilization. The Enola Gay was a fight, in effect, over the reassertion by most Americans that they're sick and tired of being told by some cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country " (Harwit, 406). On the other side, it was looked upon as a disgrace, a painful because shallow reminder, in historian Mike Wallace's words, of "the successful campaign to muzzle the Smithsonian." Indeed, against Secretary Heyman's claim that the "aircraft speaks for itself in [his] exhibit," Wallace asserts that ... in fact, it is the Enola Gay's' pilot and crew who speak on its behalf, in a sixteen minute concluding video presentation. It is certainly appropriate to include the crew's reminiscences as part of the story. But why should their ringing retroactive justification of their mission (and that of their colleagues over Nagasaki) be privileged ...? (335)

In his otherwise bold and illuminating essay, it is precisely this concluding question that Wallace leaves largely unanswered, perhaps is unable to answer, since it asks not about history but about rhetoric, not about historical truth in its narrowest sense but about truth in its general sense, as an effect of power. Indeed, why? What were the conditions of possibility for the privileging of the Enola Gay's pilot and crew? What play of forces set the stage for this singular authoritative voice to emerge?

It would seem reasonable to presume, as did both enthusiasts and detractors of Heyman's exhibit, that the aesthetics of "derealization" had a good bit to do with it, that the power of the statements made by the Enola Gay's crew was aided and abetted by the deliberate absencing of competing material and embodied accounts - the casualty projections, the statements from Eisenhower, Leahy, Wallace and Truman, the petition, the visual rem(a)inders of ground zero, and the wall mural.

But what, exactly, made all of them so certain then and makes all of us so sure now? What presumably insures, for example, that those doubly-displaced bodies and their material traces – first vaporized or wounded by the blast and then later disappeared in the historical account – are, to borrow Judith Butler’s phrase, bodies that always already matter? Counter-intuitively, perhaps, I want to suggest that they are not. It is not only a logical error but, more crucially, a hazardous political mistake to presume, as we have been habituated to do, that in this instance, as in any other, competing embodied experiences *per se* will challenge, compromise, or threaten the authority of the statements with which they come into contact. Indeed, although the presumption that the inclusion of what James E. Young terms “countermonuments” (48) will trouble the dominant discourse *may* be an enviable liberal communicative norm/ideal, to bank on it now is to turn a blind eye not only to remote and recent history but also to a future that, I want to argue, is in the making. More specifically, I want to suggest here that a conjunctural analysis of the Enola Gay exhibit and controversy – one that reads the text not against the backdrop of its occurrence but, instead, as part and parcel of that “dispersed but structured field of practices” (Grossberg, 70) within which it takes place – shows that the relative authority or power of different or, more precisely, differently positioned embodied experiences, the privileging of some and the discounting of others, is exactly that which is at stake and being produced. Even more specifically, I want to suggest that a critical engagement with that ever-proliferating cultural assemblage of historical and commemorative texts about World War II (of which the Enola Gay controversy is a part) has already begun to lay the groundwork for the emergence of a new and “fearless” “truth-teller” or “*parrhesiastes*” (Foucault 2001) for our multicultural age, and whose evolving social, cultural and political authority is predicated on *his* long-kept but recently unveiled secret – a singular but universalizable embodied experience of war.

In what I now take to be a rather prophetic essay first published in the summer of 1991 and since then reprinted several times, feminist theorist Joan Scott argues that “one of the foundations that have been reintroduced ... in the wake of the critique of empiricism” (26) is experience. Having had our proverbial transcendent carpets torn out from under our feet, we have turned to experience for support. Such a turn, Scott notes, has been as productive as it is always already risky: although experience as an analytic category has produced numerous histories that “have provided evidence for a world of alternative values

and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds" [i.e., orthodox history] (24), the act of uncovering also covers over, as she puts it,

[q]uestions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history. . . . The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world (25).

If in her original article Scott expresses a healthy but general concern for the way in which "experience" threatens to become a reified category and, even more, the bedrock of identity, Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant (among others) have queried some of its specific political entailments as it plays out in the U.S. Brown has begun to probe the potentially debilitating consequences of the disenfranchised subject's investment in his or her own experience of injury (1995), and Berlant has begun to think through the limits of the tactical use of experience or "trauma to describe the effects of social inequality" (2000: 45). Both of their analyses have signaled a warning that the short-term relief of successful injury-based rights claims may prove disastrous over the relative long-haul in so far as they play into "the fiction of the autonomous, willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject convened by modernity" and "articulated in a host of... liberal institutions" (Brown 2001: 10) that are "as likely to entrench existing powers as to redistribute power" (Brown 2001: 12).

Notwithstanding this critique of the politics of experience and its useful embellishments, there is a sense in which I want to claim that the future has already arrived, that at least one of the unwitting political entailments of the politics of experience, identity politics, or victim politics is already making itself felt by way of its cunning expropriation on the part of already empowered subjects. To state the matter directly, one of the very real limitations of suffering, injury or trauma based claims is that their logic and terms may be deployed by and pressed into the service of the privileged and powerful. Particularly in our own multicultural context in which "diversity" talk has rhetorically leveled a multiply divided and hierarchical social and political field and the experience of injury is taken to speak for itself, what Antonio Gramsci once called "the war of position" is, by way of this vast cultural assemblage, morphing into a battle

between competing survivor stories whose victor reappears time and time again in various guises on our movie screens, television sets, radios, bookshelves, and coffee tables. Put somewhat differently, we are now bearing witness to a certain “coming out” of a twenty-first century truth teller or parrhesiast: the (almost always white, male, heterosexual) voice of “the greatest generation” (Brokaw 1998) whose newly-made visible and hyper-embodied experience of suffering rhetorically renders all others pale by comparison. As Matt Daemon, who played the young Ryan in Spielberg’s extravaganza, put it for *The Buffalo News*, *Saving Private Ryan* helps “put some things in perspective ... ‘You can see us on Sally Jessy Raphael talking about how tough our lives are because we weren’t breast-fed long enough. Try taking a *beach*’” (Charles: 162). What injury-based claim can trump “the hell” that is the “Good War”? The political deck, I am suggesting, is being stacked as lines of visibility and invisibility are being culturally redrawn.

It is this thematic of the visible and the invisible that brings me back not only to the Enola Gay exhibit and the controversy that surrounded it, but also to those representation of contemporary war. I noted above that the WWII formation positions American audiences as witnesses to the “coming out” of a truth-teller for the twenty-first century. My choice of terms was far from capricious. To the contrary, it is worth noting that time and again these discourses of remembrance that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and commemoration, and world-disclosing and problem-solving, call attention to their own history of self-imposed secrecy and silence. Now what might this repeated invocation of secrecy and silence secure? In addition to rhetorically forging a direct link between the now and the then, a link that passes over rather than through the anti-war years of post-Vietnam, as well as helping establish the individual remembrance as revelatory, it more generally constitutes WWII – or a certain version thereof – as the secret, thereby encouraging the proliferation of its logics and terms. And what might all this have to say to scholars seeking to calibrate the truth effects of news media representations of wars taking place in the present? That a reading of today’s rhetoric of war that attends not only to what can and cannot be seen but also to the play of the dialectic of derealization and hyper-embodiment of which it is a part, may get hold of the contours of the secret in the making whose truth effects need not govern our future.

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