

Judith Butler. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. ISBN: 978-18-44-67626-2. Pp. 194 (Hc); 224 (Pb). Hardcover: £14.99; paperback: £10.99.

Wars are sometimes fought in defence and always at the expense of certain populations. Even in the present century where technology supposedly enables the cleanest, the most accurate destruction, collateral damage is still a widely accepted part of contemporary conflict. Destruction of homes, lives, natural habitats and infrastructure constitute the background of the world's most vulnerable populations today. This is well known because every day, war zones around the world penetrate the vision of millions of first-world media consumers.

There is little doubt that Judith Butler is among the leading scholars in contemporary Western philosophy. Although the author is most widely known for her contributions to gender theory, *Frames of War* is a compelling and authoritative critique of war, where Butler achieves in articulating what most critical observers of the War on Terror feel, but cannot quite conceptualise.

The main argument that runs through the book, and weaves the essays together is that the frames through which images are delivered to us by the media are not arbitrary. In the age of embedded reporting, photographic frames are carefully constructed by the operations of power that seek to craft our perception of reality - a reality that conforms to violent and discriminatory state policies.

As such, the camera is not only a camera but a weapon and the cameraperson a soldier. Having waged war on our senses, the media becomes an integral part of the war effort by readjusting the frame to regulate affect (fear, hope, pleasure, rage) and nullify the ethical responsiveness triggered when one confronts the face of the suffering other.

Butler's discussion on the precariousness¹ of the human, spanning throughout *Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect*, forms the basis of her dense and complex critique of state violence. The inescapable condition of precariousness is universal and equalises all living beings. Nevertheless, precarity is differentially distributed by hyper-defensive policies that conceptualise certain populations as threats to life. These lives, Butler radically argues, do not conform to the cultural and civilisational norms that make the human and thus can be disposed of, as human shields and indeed, military armament.

In the lengthy debate engaged with Susan Sontag throughout *Torture and the Ethics of Photography*, Butler argues against Sontag's position that photography does not have the power to act on our cognitive abilities like verbal narrative, reasserting the photograph as the very 'structuring scene of interpretation' (p. 67). Accordingly, Donald Rumsfeld's interference with the circulation of images from Abu Ghraib can be explained by the power of the photograph to 'construct national identity itself' (p. 72). Yet, Butler is ultimately sceptical of what the photograph can achieve, pointing to the futility of the emotional outbursts the photograph incites. Citing the lack of substantial public outrage at the Abu Ghraib tortures, Butler argues that however the pictures are evidence to the sexual and physical violence inflicted on prisoners, they are devoid of any 'magical moral agency' that might urge ethical responsiveness and thus, turn inaction to reaction (p. 91).

Nevertheless, unlike Susan Sontag and a myriad of Western intellectuals, Butler does not lament the incapacity of the photograph to mobilise us, rejecting the 'guilty and narcissistic

¹ The precariousness Butler advocates stems from the ceaseless social contact of the body with the external world, as no body exists in a vacuum.

preoccupation' with what seems to be a choice between condemnation and action (p. 99). For Butler, framing the frame by translating affect into apprehension and indeed, recognition of the precarious life is the first step towards countering the visual norms that render some populations disposable and ungrievable. However this proposal may be argued to offer redemption to the author and the reader, the distance between the intellectual and the sufferer lurk behind the author. Although Butler does not deny that *Frames of War* offers a first-world critique from a first-world setting, the mission of framing the frame ultimately falls short in political vigour and the utility the moment it leaves the page.

Sexual Politics, Torture and Time is the essay Butler is most attuned to the subject matter, where she refrains from the level of philosophical rigour of the previous essays. On a more personal level, Butler is greatly concerned about the employment of a feminist and progressive politics to rationalise state coercion. Exploring the parallels between seemingly distant instances of sexual torture in Abu Ghraib and the celebrated cover of New York Times with unveiled Afghan women, Butler asserts that such acts of coercion share a paradoxical vision of freedom, utilising coercion as a necessary tool for liberation, to rid the coerced of their perceived barbarism and backwardness by exploiting cultural taboos and sensitivities. This analysis, however compelling, is far from novel. What is striking is the relocation of the modern day civilising mission from its original context and however briefly, the exploration of its repercussions within the liberal and progressive circles.

Echoing the author's writings on queer theory, *Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative* investigates what normative frameworks mean for the subject and discourse. Butler argues that enabling the subject to emerge is not through optimising recognisability and representability for each and every one, but 'understand[ing] the differential of power at work that distinguishes between those subjects who will be eligible for recognition and those who will not', as the parameters of recognition are set by normative frameworks themselves (p. 138). The tension between the possibility and the limits of

visibility, according to Butler is intensified as one sacrifices critical thinking in order to secure judgment and indeed, make judgement possible. *Non-Thinking*, rather than standing firmly on its feet, complements the previous essays and provides a guideline to Butler's body of work. In this sense, much of what is discussed not only draws from the author's previous writings but is applicable to various subject areas.

Clam to Non-Violence completes the puzzle that is *Frames of War*. In it, however Butler argues that non-violence as a sacrosanct principle is not attainable, we are left with a picture that is far from bleak. Neither advocating blind pacifism nor violent upheaval, Butler attempts at unravelling the very origins of violence. Arguing that the norms which partially found the subject are themselves violent and drawing from psychoanalysis, that aggression lies within each and every one of us, Butler demonstrates that violence is indeed inseparable from the subject. Finally, and in full circle, Butler argues that a politics of non-violence may be realisable solely through the recognition of the precarious life. Herein lies the genius of Butler: intelligent yet humane, complex yet traceable.

As yet another intensive wave of Israeli aggression on Gaza has passed by, *Frames of War* brings to the fore the perils of embedded media, militarisation and indeed, the nation-state. It strikingly sheds light on the relationship between the war machinery and the media that dig deeper than propaganda. Moreover, in today's watershed left politics, it offers a novel and revolutionary way of conceptualising egalitarianism and social living. Reminding us of our ethical responsibility towards one another, *Frames of War* is an intellectual outcry and a call for solidarity in these times of turbulence.

Begum Icelliler
King's College London