

# How America Justifies its War: A Feminist Reading of “Shock and Awe”

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Weapons of mass destruction. The harboring of terrorists. Connections to Al Qaeda. These were the “reasons” that turned pre-emption into self-defense, a war of imperialist aggression into a “just war.” Months later, when the “reasons” melted away into half-baked excuses and repeated, though now evidently baseless and fanciful speculations, most U.S. Americans weren’t particularly surprised. Domestic support for the war only waned slightly.

It seems that the people of the United States don’t really need Bush’s reasons in order to support Bush’s war. There is still no decisive public outcry, no mass demonstrations rock the capital, no popular uprising has demanded Bush’s resignation for initiating a war without reasons. Even the feminists are far quieter than one would have expected. What was arguably the biggest feminist demonstration in history, the April 25, 2004 *March for Women’s Lives* which claimed 750,000 participants, took no official public stand against the war.

One would think that in a democratic nation, a President would be thrown out of office for such presumption. Yet even after Michael Moore’s box office hit *Fahrenheit 9/11* exposed the hypocrisy of the war to mass audiences, Bush was re-elected.

But maybe no one really believed Bush to begin with. Or maybe believing Bush and his administration on matters of *justifications* for the war is not crucial to support for the war. Maybe the question of whether the war is *just* or *unjust* is a different question from how the war is *justified*. Maybe there is an *aesthetics of war* that displaces the need for good reasons altogether. My contention is that the aesthetic dimension operates pre-reflectively, and more powerfully than rational justifications. The aesthetics that is produced to justify this war takes the form of a hyper-masculinized national identity.

This masculine style has a particularly postmodern flare, rather than being a mere reproduction of an older modern aesthetics of masculinity. Certain postmodern sensibilities are incorporated into this new version of the old aesthetic. Looking closely at this aesthetic will not only tell us something about how the current policy of aggressive war gains such broad acceptance, it will also teach some philosophical lessons about how mistaken we are when we associate liberatory impulses unequivocally with the postmodern and totalizing impulses unequivocally with the modern.

## Politics and Aesthetics

The difference between politics and aesthetics is precisely that the former must continually justify itself and the latter need not. Political acts, political decisions, aren’t *self-justifying*, or at least they shouldn’t be. We don’t levy taxes because levying taxes is a value in itself, nor do we hold elections for the sheer joy of elections. The realm of the political always has to borrow its values from somewhere else.

The aesthetic is free of all that, or at least we want it to be. The aesthetic doesn’t justify itself by appeal to religion or science, and least of all, (because such appeals would be suicidal) to politics. This doesn’t mean, of course, that it stands in no relation whatsoever to something we might call “justification.” But certainly justification in the case of the aesthetic is always *self-justification*, the values that come into play when we contemplate the beauty of nature or the work of art are generated in the realm of the

aesthetic itself, or so we hope.

Politics should be an expression of the aesthetic life of a people. And we might just leave it at that, had not certain poststructuralist insights forced us to throw into question the temporality of such happy notions, forced us to ask whether the site of the “expression” of values might not be, rather, the site of their production, whether the value itself might not be under construction in the moment of its so-called expression. U.S. American support for Bush’s war on Iraq does not depend on good reasons, it depends on the successful production of an *aesthetic of war* that is intertwined with our sense of national identity.

## Shock and Awe

The morning after the Bush Administration launched its war against Iraq with the massive aerial bombardment of the people of Baghdad, three inch high headlines appeared on new stands across the country: SHOCK AND AWE. Having just finished a book manuscript on the notion of the sublime, I was both horrified and claimed by the language of the U.S. Military and U.S. Media.

I wanted to find out where that language, a language that was drawing on and reiterating an aesthetic of the sublime in military/strategic terms, came from. My task wasn’t difficult: a document published by the National Defense University in 1996, written by a “study group” of 7 men, most of them former high-ranking military officials, was easily available on the internet. It bore the title: *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. This eighty-plus page document was the theoretical blueprint for the initial military campaign against the people of Baghdad.

In this document, the authors outline what they have come to believe is the right kind of war for a postmodern age. They see themselves as revolutionaries whose thinking will transform the way warfare is conducted, and enable the U.S. to maintain its status as the single world superpower.

The authors set about outlining an aesthetic of war that is at once its own justification and beyond the need for justification. Here U.S. sovereignty is no longer an issue of secure borders and secure interests—the authors acknowledge that these are not threatened—sovereignty becomes instead a certain style of masculinity, and war becomes a *self-making* rather than self-defending.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon 5 years after the publication of *Shock and Awe*, served as an occasion for the production of the sublime experience the authors had wished for in 1996. Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life*:

*“That the US government and military called this a ‘shock and awe’ strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think. This production takes place not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, whose senses are supposed to be done in by this spectacle, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN or Fox... (p. 148)”*

Of course the Shock and Awe strategy is not merely “like” the sublime, it is meant *to be* sublime. The experience of the sublime has a long and dirty and deeply gendered history. Space doesn’t allow me to trace the gendering of the notion of the sublime, a project that would take us back long before Kant but also to Lyotard’s postmodern account of the sublime, in which he recounts the moment of sublime experience as a rape scene in which father reason wins his independence from the natural world by raping mother imagination. Suffice it to say that the sublime is narrated as a quintessentially masculine experience of rupture from and domination over nature and the feminine. The U.S. military’s shock and awe campaign against Iraq draws on and cites this history, but recontextualizes it in a strange postmodern frame.

The sublime that emerges in the program of Shock and Awe is described at first in modernist terms, in fact in a traditionally Kantian tripartite frame. A division of perception, understanding, and will is reiterated throughout the document. The objective, we are told at least 12 times, is to render *impotent* the adversary's perception, understanding, and will, with the ultimate goal being to "neuter the will" by creating an experience of the sublime that overwhelms perception and understanding.

Yet this modern frame is fused and confused throughout the document with a postmodern sensibility: The "study group" proclaims the end of the old military strategy, called "Overwhelming Force," which held from the time of Napoleon until the fall of "the Eastern Block" in 1989. They describe the "new world order" as one in which we have made the shift from a bipolar to a multipolar world, characterized by the blurring of all kinds of boundaries that used to seem more solid. The great boundary blurrer in this scheme is the "information highway" which is portrayed as an overactive penis that links the citizen and the soldier, that penetrates the domestic and the foreign, the private and the public, the nation and the corporation. In fact, the authors tell us in a euphoric moment of military-techno-eroticism, their strategy will allow the U.S. military to penetrate this great penetrator, a technological copulation that will insure the supremacy of the U.S. on the world stage.

There are three very frightening things that characterized this document generally: first, there are repeated, ritualized invocations of US military superiority after the cold war, which describe this superiority as absolute. Second: Of course the question of how to justify the use of weapons capable of unspeakable levels of destructive force, designed to take human life, destroy infrastructure, and wreak environmental havoc into the next millennia on an unthinkable scale, becomes a tricky one when your nation is the undisputed and unchallenged world superpower, so this situation of omnipotence is understood to be a terrible economic problem. Without a credible enemy, we are faced with castration in the form of military budget cuts. The authors paint gruesome pictures of "shrinkage," and "downsizing," and "declining capacity." (This must certainly be the worst kind of castration because you cut a little bit off at a time, you never know which bit is going to be cut...) Maybe Iraq or Korea might be good places to look for a potential opponent, they tell us at one point (in 1996). If someone had weapons of mass destruction we could justify a strategy of pre-emption, they say (in 1996).

Frightening thing number 3: In looking for a positive historical precedent for Shock and Awe, the authors rave about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 5 separate passages. "The Japanese simply could not comprehend the destructive power carried by a single airplane," they tell us admiringly, "This incomprehension produced a state of awe (Intr. p. 5)." They place themselves within the tradition of this history as the point of origin and genesis for shock and awe... the first sublime act of war which positively prefigures the postmodern military age.

Certain postmodern conceptions, particularly of *time, place, power and mind*, emerge this document, in a way that mixes the modern and the postmodern, and this very mix functions to reaffirm U.S. omnipotence. Here totalizing power is confirmed through the dispersal of power; the compression of time becomes a function of the ownership of time; absolute or universal mind gains its very absoluteness, its very unity, from the way it is scattered across the territory of the particular; and nature becomes a function of culture such that it serves the project of unilateral domination of the entire world scene by the U.S. military.

**Time:** The strategy of shock and awe hinges on the ability of the U.S. military to compress the time experience of the adversary, to trap the adversary in *the instant*. "Owning the dimension of time will be critical to the success of Rapid Dominance (3:8)," the authors tell us. The authors call for swift, instantaneous, concurrent destruction or disruption at multiple sites and multiple levels, from physical destruction to the disruption of the adversary's command and control structure, or information grid. Owning time removes the time condition for the U.S. military, but overwhelms the adversary with the shock of mortality, the shock of not having any time, of time run out.

**Place:** Shock and awe requires the collapse of nature into the culture of terror produced by the U.S. military. It requires “physical control of the land, sea, air and space and control of the ‘ether’ in which information is passed and received...” the authors write, “By depriving the adversary of the physical use of time, space, and the ether, we play on the adversary’s will and offer the prospect of certain destruction should resistance follow (5:2).” Earth, air, and water are not enough for rapid dominance, the “ether,” which here is the substance through which information passes, is collapsed into the environment of terror produced by instantaneous destruction and disruption across thousands of particular points of impact. The strategy, most centrally, *is to become the environment* itself.

**Power:** Power, similarly, is conceived as both absolute and dispersed into micro-sites. In fact, it is the very dispersal of power that guarantees its totalizing force. The authors use the term “signature control,” to name the capacity to control what bits of information reach which of the soldiers, commanders, or political decision makers on the adversary’s side, and who they perceive to be the author, or originator of that information. Power is exercised through simultaneous micro-interventions, micro-penetrations into the adversary’s information system or grid. This, along with displays of “massive fire power” produces an experience of “shock and awe” that will, the authors assure us, lead to immediate and unconditional capitulation.

**Mind:** Absolute mind takes on a strangely postmodern form in Shock and Awe. Producing Shock and Awe requires “near total or absolute knowledge and understanding of self, adversary and environment,” the authors tell us, “perfect or near perfect information” “total situational awareness.” But lest we mistake this reference to “mind” to be a reference to a modern notion of consciousness or inwardness that inhabits an individual subject, other references in the document make it clear that mind here is the context in which the individual soldiers and commanders perform rather than the content of anyone’s individual consciousness. Mind is the dispersed “grid,” the “network,” the “system” that is produced by techniques of “data mining,” “data exploitation.”

And mind is the penis that can penetrate the penetrator. “Direct insertion,” they tell us, is still very important, but it is actually more important in a postmodern age to “get into the minds,” of the enemy, “to act inside their decision loop,” to “intrude into the enemy’s control system.” The strategy of penetrating the enemy’s “mind,” involves a bit of gender-bending as well, by developing “systems of systems” this phallus engulfs and penetrates at the same time.

It becomes obvious here that the sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners of war is integral to Shock and Awe. The homosexualizing of the prisoners, the exposure of the anus, as if for penetration, takes place in relation to US American defense intellectuals who write about penetrating the great penetrator. In both cases, the pictures, are important. The photographs of Shock and Awe and the photographs of torture invite us to share in the omnipotence, to affirm ourselves as tiny points on the grid of a godlike subject.

In this military-technological aesthetic, all of us Americans are part of the hyper-masculinized, but dispersed and systematized techno-military subject of sublime experience. Time is owned. Place collapses. Whatever “nature” there is, is produced by the military/media system. Power is dispersed, yet condensed. Meeting this power is to be like a direct confrontation with God, but a god dispersed among countless micro-points on a grid.

What is philosophically interesting here, what we might learn from this mixing of what we, in philosophical contexts, so diligently separate and distinguish—careful to understand how differently the modern and the postmodern are constituted—is that what is totalizing and universalizing in a negative sense, in this instance gets its very vitality and currency from the dispersal and particularization which we have tended to find, on a theoretical level, so hopeful. This matters, and it matters particularly to feminists who are interested in continuing to articulate a liberatory philosophy in

the face of the unspeakable injustice and violence that is the hallmark of this foreign policy.

But beyond this philosophical lesson is a political lesson about the militarized American aesthetic of masculinity and sovereignty. When war becomes an expression of *this* style, then it is beyond the mundane structures of international law. When sovereignty becomes a stylized Rambo-on-steroids identity rather than the status of the nation state, war is no longer a question of protecting national borders or national interests, but simply a matter of self-expression and self-constitution. Such an approach fuses and confuses matters of masculine style with matters of life and death. Reasons for war can be made up as one goes along, can be changed whenever convenient, because in the end the real justification is not the reason for the war, *but the subject that is constituted through it*. In this context, all critique is an attack on the state, all dissent is a threat to identity, international outcry is an irritating misunderstanding of *who we are*.

If support for Bush's foreign policy rests on a national style that too many Americans live like we live our own skins, then making some change in the situation is no superficial matter. There is perhaps some cause for hope in the fact that U.S. American styles of masculinity are notoriously fickle. The Vietnam war gave us, among other things, the long-haired, peace-loving, LSD-consuming male poet, who while no friend to women's liberation, at least rejected the kind of approach to others that would generate a policy of pre-emptive strike and perpetual war. In fact the emergence of another national style may well require a national resistance movement to the current U.S. policy that can capture the imaginations of enough U.S. citizens, powerfully enough, to make the aesthetic of Bush's war as laughable and as repulsive as it, in fact, is. And the constitution of this other national style requires a feminist analysis and movement that takes an uncompromising and active stand against the war on Iraq.