



Provided by the author(s) and University of Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Frames of war: when is life grievable? (invited review essay)
Author(s)	Kenny, Kate
Publication Date	2010
Publication Information	Kenny, K. (2010) 'Frames of war: when is life grievable? (invited review essay)'. <i>Journal Of Power</i> , 3 (3):459-466.
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Link to publisher's version	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17540291.2010.525837
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/2696

Downloaded 2023-09-29T09:48:00Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? by Judith Butler. Verso, 193pp., hardcover £11 (Amazon.co.uk)

Sometimes when faced with photographs and videos of terrible war scenes, we are left feeling nothing. Though increasingly exposed to images of the horrors of conflict, we often remain immune, unable to really engage with the terror being depicted in the pictures we see. It is true that certain images and stories do manage to slip through the shield of numbness and affect people deeply, like the black and white image of a child burned by napalm during the Vietnam war that circulated through the United States, or the tale of a Christmas truce between soldiers in the trenches during World War I. In these special, one-off instances, the inescapable humanity of the enemy, the “other” of war, comes sharply into focus. Butler’s latest book is about how this can happen, and what it might lead to. She seems ideally placed to ask these questions at this point in her work. Thus far, her scholarship represents a deep engagement with questions of how we identify with societal norms and how this marks our relations with other people (1990; 2004), how different forms of interpretation persist in society, and how these forms represent a stark and often painful exercise of power (1993; 1997). In her latest book, Butler builds on this theoretical corpus, bringing it to work on contemporary wars and how they are interpreted and experienced. Specifically, *Frames of War* is an exploration of the ways in which recent U.S.-led wars in the Middle East have come to be framed, and how this framing shapes the way we apprehend and engage with the victims of conflict. Moreover, framing shapes what we can possibly feel about people presented to us in this manner. Butler focuses on this notion of feeling, or affect, to address the question of an ethical response to acts of war. The book’s continuous engagement with, and contribution to, current debates on war, violence and racism renders it important for contemporary work on the nature of power. In particular, Butler is interested in pulling apart and examining representations of war that we tend to take for granted. This stance mirrors the aims of the *Journal of Power*, whose founders argue that in order to understand power, scholars must continually search for the counter-intuitive, the surprising and the alternative as they emerge in particular social settings (Haugaard and Malesevic, 2008:2). In this article, I introduce the main themes of the five essays that make up *Frames of War* against the backdrop of Butler’s wider work. I present some key insights and critical observations while doing so.

Valid Life. Butler’s concept of a valid life is an important part of her theoretical approach to war. The idea is: if people are to ever really question acts of war, which she hopes we will, first we must first truly engage with the fact that people’s lives are lost as a result of these acts, and that these lost lives were important. This somewhat simplistic idea informs Butler’s exploration of how an anti-war impetus might emerge. Death can only happen to those we consider to have been human in the first place, those whose loss prompts shows of grief. Before we can begin to articulate, politically, the simple demand that no life may be lost in the name of war, we must really see that life as valuable: that other person as actually living. The question of what kinds of life are considered valid is one that has been central to her work since the publication of *Gender Trouble*. Then, she argued that

the general apathy in the United States towards AIDS deaths during the mid-eighties was a clear demonstration that sometimes certain lives are simply not seen to be quite as valuable as others. For Butler, homosexual victims of this disease were seen as quasi-living, somewhat shadowy figures operating at the borders of what a “valid life” is considered to be, and were not considered worthy of public grief. The current book is very much a continuation of this theme, the idea that while we often apprehend, or notice, particular forms of life, this does not necessarily mean that we fully recognize these people, or value their existence. As examples of how the validity of some lives remain in question, she focuses on the lives that we apprehend as part of the process of war; the potential terrorist in Guantanamo Bay, or the prisoner in Abu Ghraib. How do we think about these lives? Do we see them as grievable, or alternatively, as never fully living? If the latter, the horror of their death is not quite as upsetting, and our political response is likely to be deadened.

It is clear that the question of what constitutes a valid person must take into account the particular norms that persist in society at any one time. This relates to one of Butler’s most important contributions to debates on power and politics; in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) she takes up where Foucault left off towards the end of his life, and asks what is happening at the micro level of the subject when powerful norms governing social life are being reproduced. In exploring the question, she valuably engages in theories of power and psychoanalysis to understand how the actions of many diverse people make up the “entire network of power that functions in a society (and makes *it* function)” (Foucault, 1990: 94-95). Her work on this topic has been recognized by Stuart Hall and others as among the most “rigorously argued” theoretical approaches to contemporary questions of subjection to power on offer today (Hall, 2000: 28), and has informed studies on identity in disciplines as diverse as organization theory (Harding, 2003; Kenny, forthcoming 2010). One important insight from this earlier work, which reappears in *Frames of War*, is that the ontology of what counts as a subject is an historically contingent one; what is considered to be a “valid life” differs across different places and different times. As Butler notes, subjects “are constituted through” norms that generate the “terms through which subjects are recognized”, including terms that specify a valid life (2009: 3). Importantly, norms are founded and sustained in relation to those subjects that fall *outside* of the boundary: a norm depends on its expelled others to sustain and define itself (Butler, 1990). The expelled, the shadowy figure that haunts the border that circumscribes the idea of a valid life, is a central theme in *Frames of War*. In short therefore, if we want to think about how to see lives as worth preserving, we need to consider the norms that govern our very concept of valid life. We must examine those who are excluded by this concept and ask what maintains the boundary between valid, grievable and loveable beings, and those shadowy others whose loss we will not mourn.

Framing. For Butler, issues of representation are central. While she acknowledges that the material reality of war and destruction cannot be discounted, she wants to highlight how war is also a process of crafting images. In fact, she notes, such representations are how we apprehend the very materiality of war itself. The subjects of war are framed and presented to

us in particular ways. At the moment, for example, populations targeted in U.S.-led wars in the Middle East are not presented as valid lives that merit care and protection by that country's government and its media. Framing styles and norms ensure that these are not quite lives, not really worth grieving and therefore easy to forfeit. Butler sees state practices of "selectively carving up experience" through processes of framing as central to this forfeiting, and therefore, as "essential to the conduct of war" (2009: 26). Particular groups are cast in particular ways, for example, as threats to U.S. citizens' existence, rather than as living people who are vulnerable and deserve shelter from violence. The state is central to this for Butler; policy acts as an important framing mechanism by which the very ontological status of whole populations is constructed and distorted in ways that make it easy to dismiss them. This is why we can often be left feeling numb even in the face of unspeakable horror. We are saturated with media images of war, famine and plague and yet many of these images pass us by, because they do not represent what we take to be valid. These are lives that do not merit grieving. Framing the subjects of war in certain ways ensures and sustains this blindness. Our potential to see and to feel is carefully controlled so that we do not engage with certain others, and do not feel their pain. Feeling is amplified and heightened on behalf of some groups, and foreclosed and prevented on behalf of others. In this way, affect is regulated. We find it hard to think of grieving for suicide bombers, she argues, but those killed by some forms of state-sponsored violence, including war deaths, evoke a sense of sadness, tinged with acceptance that on some level justice has been served. Our potential for affect is, inescapably, coloured and influenced by the frames through which we interpret different events. Grievability is thus monitored and controlled: and so also is the ethical response that is possible.

Framing is not static, however, nor is it easily determined. Drawing on Benjamin's ideas about cultural reproduction, Butler notes that while frames are certainly powerful, they can never be trusted to remain in place. A digital photograph intended to be shared among one's colleagues and friends can suddenly escape its original context and intended audience, as happened in the images taken at Abu Ghraib, the subject of chapter 2: *Torture and the Ethics of Photography*. Frames are not rigid, but can proliferate and escape in unpredictable ways. Crucially, whatever is in the frame can be interpreted differently, depending on where it ends up: what is somewhat normal to one audience can be horrific to another. This horror demands an affective response. In the casual, grainy photographs from Abu Ghraib, soldiers proudly pose beside the prisoners they torture with dogs. Prompted by this chapter, I revisited these pictures on the Internet: an embodied, chilling and nauseating transportation into a world where young, ordinary-looking soldiers torture other people and smile about it. This was made all the more shocking by the experience of seeing my own face in the woman soldier that grins back at the camera: an almost omnipotent, triumphant smile on her white, anglo-saxon face. The cold, rehearsed and coercive frames by which we are *supposed* to engage with these others fade into irrelevance as we are shocked into realizing our proximity to people committing such horrible acts, against people we may have barely even apprehended before the moment of seeing the photograph. In such instances, we are suddenly made aware of

the interdependencies we hold, which as Butler notes, are often unwilling by us, but nevertheless confront us starkly when the frames fall apart. Along with the photographs from Abu Ghraib, Butler takes the example of the small collection of poetry written by inmates of Guantanamo Bay, which managed to survive the harsh censorship of the U.S. Department of Defence. Reading these simple, short verses, the purely subjective and emotive experiences of their authors touches the reader. The words tell of the confusion, longings and fears of the interned poets and thus smash through the official ideology surrounding the purpose of Guantanamo Bay and its supposed role in protecting U.S. national security. Again, these simple and short bursts of subjectivity suddenly and radically break apart our framed preconceptions about these subjects of war, particularly when they emerge in places that we absolutely did not expect to find them. We don't think of poems when we think of potential terrorists, and the photography of war is normally carefully regulated by governments. When the frames come apart, we are offered a glimpse of the subject of the wars carried out in our name, the "specter that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside" (2009: 12). We are forced to face up to those specters: shadowy figures who were expelled from the norm in order to preserve it, and which simultaneously threaten to undo its boundaries by their very presence and continual return. In moments like these a reality that we may have taken for granted is suddenly problematized and "called into question", with the sudden and shocking exposure of the "orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame" (2009: 12). In pointing all of this out, Butler argues that we remain continually vigilant for these kinds of slippages and to work to ensure that instances in which the frame "breaks with itself" can happen more often. This insight is consistent with Foucault's comments that continuous problematization ought to be the work of today's philosophers (Foucault, 1991), a position that Butler takes again and again, questioning accepted norms of gender (1990), sexuality (1993) and war.

Precarity A third important aspect of *Frames of War* involves the development of Butler's concept of precarity. Continuing with the theme of whether an ethical response to war is possible, can the above observations inform how we act, politically? It is clear that we need a new way of thinking and talking about other people, one that encompasses respect for others' valid lives. Such a new way of thinking about personhood must respect our connections to others, connections that emerge in moments such as those described here. The concept of precarity does this work, invoking a new "ontology of the subject" in ways that demand to preserve its both its humanity and its entitlement to persist. This ontology stands in contrast to recent calls from those who see identity politics as a useful way of responding to differences between people in society. Butler notes that identity politics tend to trap people into pre-defined categories not of their choosing, after which different groups are often set against each other by state institutions in struggles for resources and for recognition. The central role of the state in such 'identity abuse' is the focus of chapter 3, *Sexual Politics, Torture and Secular Time*, in which she discusses the 'barbaric civilizing project' that marks contemporary western democracies. In the Netherlands, for example, vulnerable populations are categorized into distinct identity groups and used

against each other. Butler describes the “dogmatic secularism” that insists all citizens subscribe to liberal discourses of sexual freedom, regardless of their faith (2009: 123). She presents the example of incoming immigrants to that country being told to look upon photographs of men kissing and report whether or not they feel repulsion. This ‘test’ of one’s suitability for citizenship is a barbaric form of foregrounding identity-based difference, as the spotlight is turned on homosexuals and immigrants as radically other to the nation, and to each other. It likewise acts to uphold a culturally, sexually and ethnically “pure” state by clearly announcing how particular prescribed identity groups are to behave. In this way, identity politics can often be about rigid separation and inscribed differences, and is finally counterproductive if the aim is to really cherish and value all subjects. Likewise, Butler is skeptical about discourses of “rights”, noting that they can lead to technical, legal arguments about competing rights, with a similar slippage in focus from the human at the centre of the argument. She gives the example of states, presumably the U.S., suspending legal rights in certain circumstances in order to ostensibly preserve a different set of rights, for example in the name of national security. It must be noted that she values both the rights and identity politics approaches as political tools that are sometimes necessary, but, like Foucault, Butler is continually seeking to challenge and problematize. In contrast to these then, *precarity* offers a preferable way for us to think about those that are other to us.

Precarity is a concept that arises from the idea that we are bodily beings: we have bodies that come into existence and that eventually die. In the meantime, they are vulnerable to war, famine, and poverty: haunted by the potential of annihilation. “To live is always to live a life that is at risk from the outset”, and which can be “expunged quite suddenly from the outside and for reasons that are not always under one’s control” (2009: 30). No amount of individual drive or personal wealth can cancel out the precarious nature of our selves. While these may at times ameliorate the threat, we all share in our bodily vulnerability and our proximity to death. The one thing that stands between our bodies and this destruction is the presence of others. Bodies depend upon that which surrounds them, whether social institutions, families or friends, in order to sustain and flourish. So, as for Hobbes and Hegel, the self and its body are fundamentally supported by the social: we are necessarily interdependent, an argument Butler develops in depth elsewhere (2004). In *Frames of War*, this very sociality is the basis of an ethical impulse—our precarious, involved selves should be the reason for ethics, rather than a rights- or identity-based politics. It’s not that we need to come to know everyone personally, but rather to see precarity as a condition that we all experience, and that we should all be sheltered from exposure to. Butler points to the situation where some lives suffer because networks of supports fail them, where people come to be exposed in different ways to hunger, violence and death, where whole populations remain precarious. Based on our common condition of precarity, therefore, we need to be committed to preserving the conditions in which life might flourish. If this sounds like a surprisingly normative argument for Judith Butler, it is. Her argument stops short of claiming precarity as a universal condition however, rather she is careful to refer to it as a ‘generalizable condition’ (2009: 23). As is clear from

her arguments with Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau (Butler et al. 2001), she is committed to seeing all political positions and concepts, even precarity, as contestable and continually open to challenge.

Butler paints an exciting picture of a future politics in which precarity, and ongoing challenge, take precedence. Rather than ameliorate difference as an integrative perspective might argue, or enshrine it once and for all in identity codes, this new perspective would foster ongoing antagonisms, respecting them as an inevitable and constructive part of the struggle to ensure greater protection of people. This point is interesting for scholars of power: the idea here is that aggression is not being banished: Butler recognizes that destructive tendencies are inherent to us all and in this, her debts to Hegel and Freud are clear. In fact, she notes, non-aggression is “neither a virtue nor a universally acceptable principle” (2009: 171), but rather a façade of non-aggression likely marks a conflicted, frustrated situation where rage is being crafted against itself, merely masquerading as something pure and beautiful. Instead, she argues that we acknowledge its presence and think about aggression in more depth, for example, distinguishing it from violence. For Butler, we must “find ways of crafting and checking destructiveness, giving it a liveable form... affirming its existence and assuming responsibility for it” (2009: 49). Aggression in the form of dissent, antagonism, discursive conflict, strikes and the “carefully crafted ‘fuck you’” are all necessary and important aspects of healthy democracy (2009: 182). This idea is the core of Chapter 5, *The Claim of Non-Violence*, in which she draws on Klein and Winnicott’s work on the psyche to understand the paradox of managing a destructive tendency towards the other, while protecting both the other and the self from this very tendency. This, for Butler, is ethics itself- a permanent practice and site of struggle that always seeks to protect and preserve our precarious selves, and to ensure that conditions for flourishing and sustenance are guarded.

Interestingly, this insight points to a limitation of the book: at times her defence of the subjects of war is a little too strong. She argues in chapter 4, *Non-Thinking in the Name of the Normative* that we should focus on tolerance to ensure a liveable life for all (2009: 141). While this is of course valid, there is a tinge of condescension to it because it implies a denial of the full reach of human subjectivity to those she seeks to tolerate. Surely a project really committed to reinstating the subjectivity of the other in U.S. citizens’ eyes would also focus on the aggressive potential inherent to those others, just as this is present in ourselves. Such a project would show how victims can do wrong sometimes, how even these most precarious of lives are also engaged in the kinds of aggression she argues to be inescapable part of being human.

This limitation does not take from the value of Butler’s latest book. In *Frames of War*, the crucial empirical setting allows her to showcase the value of previous work on conceptualizing how the subject and power intertwine as life unfolds. Moreover, these concepts are developed further in this book, as they go to work on considerations of how conflicts are framed. For this reviewer, the real impact of the text is experienced in the act of reading it, which is at one moment chilling and the next uplifting as Butler reminds us about aspects of life that we know to be true. This is nowhere clearer than when she details

the complexity and fragility of our own loving, aggressive social bonds, before insisting that we readers engage with the full implication of the ethical responsibilities we hold to our others.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London, Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. London, Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. London, Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume I, An Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Polemics Politics and Problematizations. The Foucault Reader. P. Rabinow. London, Penguin: 381-390.
- Harding, N. (2003). The Social Construction of Management. London, Routledge.
- Hall, S. (2000) 'Who needs "identity"?' in *Identity: A reader*. du Gay, P., Evans, J. and Redman, P. (eds), London, Sage/The Open University, 15-31.
- Kenny, K. (2009). "The performative surprise: parody, documentary and critique." *Culture and Organization* 15(2): 221-235.
- Kenny, K. (forthcoming, 2010) 'Beyond ourselves: Passion and the Dark Side of Identification in an Ethical Organization'. *Human Relations*