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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **29 (2013)**

PDF erstellt am: **11.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-390808>

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# Framing War: Domesticity and the Visuality of Conflict

Isabel Capelo Gil

The extraordinary experience of mutual destruction presented by violent conflict exceeds the anthropological ordering enacted by culture, hence supporting a discourse of domestic framing. This has also been the case whenever visual media have sought to depict, represent or report conditions of warfare. War and the domestic nexus of home and family seem at times in danger of becoming interrelated discourses. The essay looks at the intertwining of the ideology of home and the rhetoric of war in war photography and aims specifically at discussing the ways in which art reacts against this discursive practice. Drawing on Martha Rosler's series *Bringing the War Home*, it underpins how a counter-domestic visuality is constructed as a way of denaturalizing the embedding of home and nation, particularly at a time of growing limitations for the practice of news journalism.

## *I. Frames*

For most, if not all of us, war is representation. It comes as an image projected onto the mind and supported by narrative. War is after death the uncanniest of human experiences and yet one that not only attracts representation, but also marks the discursive mode in which subjects deal with reality and produce meaning. The structural antagonism underlying any discursive practice has been suggestively discussed by Michel Foucault's take on the warring (*guerroyant*) (Foucault 185) dimension of linguistic utterances, as well as by Jean-Luc Nancy's reflection on the scopic – from the Greek *skopos*, i.e. literally the visual and the target – as

the privileged way of appropriating the world in modernity (Nancy 41). Yet, this generalization of warring antagonism as supporting the very existence of discourse does not come without further dangers, as it tends to naturalize the exception of war as a trope of everyday action. This general contention is, however, not the one undertaken here, as I wish to discuss how the very exception of the event of war is domesticized when submitted to the joint work of representation and cultural mediation. When it is communicated and represented, war becomes culture. The cultural work of war thus views warfare as a situated event, represented by social narratives, which across several media, from literature to photography and film, work to render its exceptional violence meaningful to readers, spectators, audiences.

The extraordinary experience of mutual destruction presented by violent conflict exceeds the anthropological ordering enacted by culture, hence supporting a discourse of domestic framing. This has also been the case whenever visual media have sought to depict, represent or report conditions of warfare. In fact, one of the most recurring discourses that comes across whenever the experience of war is represented is that of the legitimation of conflict for the sake of home and family. The nexus that links the violent actions undertaken by the collective family, the nation, with the defence of the private family has marked modern political theory from the inception of the nation-state and has drawn heavily from bourgeois family ideology in its clash against the ethics of the court society, as Norbert Elias famously discussed in *The Civilizing Process*. The homefront, a term popularized with WWI, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, stressed the link between the ideology of the nation at war and the home. What is more, since war was fought to defend the values of the nation, and the nation was the collective family, then it metonymically became a strategy to support and legitimate the domestic values of home. It is thus that American studies scholar John Carlos Rowe considers in his study of Vietnam imagery, “The [American] family as the most lethal institution in the world” (Rowe 3). War and the domestic nexus of home and family seem at times of danger to become interrelated discourses.

By looking at war visibility,<sup>1</sup> the paper will ask how domesticity works as a cultural frame for images in time of war, why it is a privileged

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<sup>1</sup> Visibility is defined as a semiotic-cultural structure that organizes the flow of images in the social construction of modernity and simultaneously supports the visual construction of the social. A cultural analysis of visibility is necessarily rooted in the present and looks out and back from the researcher’s position, hence demanding a comparative outlook across time, media and geography. As a situated social construct, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues visibility renders the processes of history visible to power (5) and discloses the role images play therein.

means of rendering the utterly alien experience of death in battle meaningful and what it does to the exercise of responsible critical judgement. Yet, although the home and the family as discursive practices constrain meaning production, by allowing some representations to work and disallowing others, I suggest they may also be called into question. Martha Rosler's photographic work "Bringing the War Home," arguably frames the frame, showing that ultimately, as Judith Butler argues, it can never quite fully determine what it is we see, think, recognize and apprehend (Butler 9). Drawing on Rosler's activist photomontage, the paper will discuss how the use of counter-domesticity as a radical visual discourse in art photography's treatment of war denaturalizes the visuality of home and nation and presents art as a new outlet for critical discourse at a time of growing restrictions for news journalism.

## *II. The Visuality of War*

Modern visuality is deeply implicated in the structure of modern warfare. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz conceded that vision was a prerogative of the skilled general, who could thus generate an image of the battlefield and of the development of battle without disclosing it to the enemy. War became hence a visual manoeuvre rehearsed in the mind of the strategist and embodied in the raw flesh of the clashing armies. Either in the mental vision of the war strategist, as for Clausewitz, or through Paul Virilio's "invisible weapons that make things visible," the management of visibility and visuality is indeed at the root of modern war strategy. The epitome of how deeply entangled the modern technologies of vision and war are, is, according to Virilio, "[. . .] the blinding shot of the Hiroshima flash which literally photographed the shadow cast by beings and things, so that every surface immediately became war's *recording* surface, its *film*" (Virilio 1). Arguably, visuality as a discursive practice is also marked by antagonism. In fact, not only is the construction of scopic regimes deeply framed by social, ethical or political conflict, but no less contentious is the way in which subjects see, look at others and make sense of themselves. What we see, how we see and the institutional regimes that both constrain and are constrained by vision are far from being natural and unproblematic. Images do, in fact, structure the way subjects construct difference and distinction, how they recognize their kin and mark the Other as alien. The gaze produces the field of vision as a dichotomous battleground where, whilst strengthening the bonds of an ideal home, difference is constructed and upheld.

How then do images play into the domestic ideology of war? Schechter in a study on embedded journalism during the Iraq war stresses that it is still the domestic agenda that manages overseas interventions. Whether perceived as psychological warfare against the US population (Schechter 8), or with the aim of stifling dissent and garnering support under the national flag (Dalglish et al 97), the fact of the matter is that the domestic frame is not a bygone narrative but continues to be inalienably linked to waging war and to its representation. By framing the unfathomable images of State sponsored killing into a coherent narrative, images foster a regime of the visible that serves the purposes of explaining to home audiences the State's policy of violence. Together with the increasing aesthetical sense marking war photography, this has brought on a critique of the visual turn in news reporting, with the pressure of ideological commitment weakening the denunciatory mandate of journalism. I suggest, nevertheless, that it has also opened up a new public space of visual contestation by co-opting war photographs into art.<sup>2</sup>

Barbie Zelizer contends that despite its referential vocation, the visibility of war in news photography has been losing evidential force, especially over the past 10 years, and more so after 2003 and the Iraq War. She argues, the increased number of photographs featured in newspapers "offers a turn to familiar images that couche war's representation in already resonant ways" (Zelizer 124). There is an enormous availability of photo ops on the war field and audiences lust for the imagery of war but at the same time there is a rather sober tendency to refuse and object to graphic pictures, that has prompted newspaper editors to keep newspapers "family friendly" (124). They are more prone to enhance familiarity with sympathetic victims, as in the case of the Bosnian war, and instead stress distance with exotic perpetrators as in Iraq or Afghanistan footage. When war is reduced to a photograph, Zelizer suggests, its usage may lead to faulty news since it "depends on journalism being less journalistic than it needs to be" (131). For Zelizer the problem has three further causes: one is the appeal of dramatic material and the way the photograph, specially by enhancing colour gives vent to pathos; the second is the loss of referentiality that leads journalists to frame shots of one event with familiar images from the past therefore

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag is a remarkable example of a theoretical change of heart in this regard. The privilege of the indexical visibility in photography she presents in *On Photography* is radically toned down later in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where from Caillot to Goya, she responds to art's unrelenting testimonial power, particularly with reference to Jeff Wall's 1992 piece "Dead Troops Talk" (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain* 121-123). On the importance of the art gallery as the last stand of war photography's, radical resilience and mnemonic power beyond the fleeting oblivion of the news media, see Monegal 11.

provoking a misperception of the situated nature of the ongoing conflict. Thirdly, and following from the two previous elements, the privileging of aesthetical appeal over news reporting endangers the very nature of news reporting. Basically, when the aesthetical takes over the evidential nature of the photograph, journalism is in danger. Yet, what Zelizer views as the aesthetical danger of the photograph for news reporting with the ensuing loss of evidentiary force and critical distancing, has gained a different status in view of the critique of embedded reporting in the Iraq war, that has turned journalists into “weapons of mass deception” (Schechter 8).<sup>3</sup>

This framing crisis and the increasing call for a critical engagement with the Iraq war has brought on two differing responses. On the one hand, the strict rejection of photojournalism and the emergence of activist anti-photojournalism.<sup>4</sup> On the other, the turn towards aestheticization and the art gallery as the new space for public criticism. Arguably, the strict distinction of war photography as newsworthy/anti-newsworthy and aesthetic seems reductive within a wider understanding of visual culture, that is less interested in institutional conflict and the reverential nature the photograph serves, as Sontag claims (*Regarding the Pain* 120) than it is in its purpose and changing meaning. Shifting reception conditions are indeed more relevant to the function and place the photograph occupies. Now, more than ever, with the increasing need for overlapping narrative frames of past wars to understand current visuality, “The photographer’s intentions are irrelevant in this larger process” (*Regarding the Pain* 122).

Still, the gap between journalism’s perception of the institutional place of images in war and the refusal of what is seen as the amateurish and idle artist’s usage of war photography is discursively unavoidable,<sup>5</sup> but despite the numerous examples of manipulation, quick generalizations are more harmful than enlightening. Images of war, particularly in photojournalism, are indeed complex structures that although referential, do not lack aesthetic allure. While evidential and drawn to capture

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<sup>3</sup> See also Butler 165.

<sup>4</sup> The term was coined by Allan Sekula to address his response to the 1999 anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle, reflected in his “Waiting for the teargas” photo series (1999). It is a partisan way of dealing with the image, aiming to place the photographer’s intent at the forefront of the depiction, and controlling the gaze by blending with the object and acting upon it. See on this topic the exhibition “Antifotoperiodismo” which opened in July 2010 in La Virreina, Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona, curated by Carles Guerra.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol Kino’s enlightening *New York Times* article (5 September 2008) on Martha Rosler’s 2008 exhibition at the Mitchell-Innes and Nash Gallery in Chelsea, New York, and her 2004-2008 series “Bringing the War Home.”

“the real,” they are socially constructed, snapped by a subjective agent, mediated by editors and publishers and finally received by heterogeneous audiences. Images may be manipulated, they may lie, deceive with the language of transparency and show through invisibility. Yet, although intent is not all, intent too matters. And it matters, particularly when the photograph serves an evidential purpose in times of war. Evan Wright of *Rolling Stone* Magazine and embedded with US Marines in Iraq witnessed, in the earlier stages of the occupation, a trigger-happy young soldier shooting at the civilian population. His reaction as he came across the victims is noteworthy:

Again, being a reporter, I’m thinking in the back of my mind, “This is gruesome. This is awesome. This is perfect. I’ve got everything now. This is the honest truth. I was there when the shooting happened, and everyone knew that Trombley was the one who shot them.”

(quoted by Katovsky and Carlson 336).

Excitement and denunciation come together when the shot is taken and the photograph, at once startling, shocking, objective and appealing, is the sole witness to this unique moment. No matter how shocking the journalist’s thrill at the ghastly event, the fact of the matter is that the mandate to testify and to use the camera as an instrument of accountability allowing those who were far away to make sense of a senseless situation remains invaluable. Despite the would-be aestheticization of the shot and the possible pathetic appeal of the scattered bodies, the force of the evidential visual immediacy renders the photograph a privileged medium to denounce the violence of war and to exert informed reporting. In this evidential framework comparative visuality is a key strategy with ethical consequences.<sup>6</sup>

The 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial with the title “Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images” provides a good example of a successful presentation of the imagery of war from a comparative visual culture perspective. Curated by Julian Stallabrass, the show displayed side by side professional photos, photos taken by members of the armed forces acting either as professional photographers or as amateurs,

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion surrounding the photo of a man pushed to his death on a New York subway and published on the front page of *The New York Post* on 4 December 2012. The photo by free-lance photographer R. Umar Abbasi caused outrage. Arguing for the right of news photography to show as essential to its democratic mandate, Barbie Zelizer contends. It is not the graphic imagery of the dead body but instead the picture of the man about to die that causes pity and provokes commotion, because visual affect is managed by assemblages of emotion regulated by discourses of power (*Why we are outraged*).

photographs built into context in magazines, newspapers and on the Web as well as family snapshots, and finally art and museum photography. Aware of the genre inconsistencies, of the institutional differences and time discrepancies amongst the images displayed, Stallabrass declared the intent to foster a reflection on the interplay between particularity and generality, aesthetic and descriptive matter, the familial look and the alienness of the Other depicted in the theatre of war. In fact, the work was based on a play of contrasts, “one which allows comparison and contrast, and encourages critical examination of different generic forms of production” (Stallabrass 8). Because critique emerges at the site of comparison, a similar ethics of contrastive visual criticism frames the following discussion. And it is here at the threshold of comparative visibility that domesticity emerges, not simply as a trope, but as a rhetorical strategy to render the alien experience of war meaningful while opening up discursive spaces for discussion and critique.

### *III. The Domestication of War*

Let me take you through three sets of images which allow for a representative discussion of what I suggest are four structural modes of visual domestication of the radically disruptive event of war: *normalization, meta-framing, phaticity and reification*. In order to look into how war imagery tends to normalize the exception of war, let us look briefly at a short of the Spanish-American War, dating back to 1898, and shot by Thomas A. Edison Inc, named “Burial of the ‘Maine’ Victims.” It depicts a stream of ceremonial cars bearing the coffins of the deceased soldiers of the battleship *Maine*, sunk in La Habana harbour on 15 February 1898.



Figure 1. “Burial of the Maine Victims.” Edison Manufacturing Co. 1898.  
Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and  
Recorded Sound Division (FEC2885).  
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Library of Congress)



This “view” as it was called in the early days of cinema was shown to American audiences with a documentary intent. First comes a detachment of sailors and marines in the left foreground, while on the right the viewer observes a crowd of small black boys, a usual practice in any public procession in the South. Then follow the nine hearses, each coffin draped with the national flag. At the side of each wagon walk the pall bearers, surviving comrades, their heads bowed in attitudes of grief. Next come naval officers and marines, and lastly a procession of carriages, followed by a large crowd on foot. Although the view was portrayed as a documentary, the fact of the matter is that the sequence was actually a reenactment, shot at Key West, Florida on 27 March 1898. Nevertheless, the evidentiary hoax is institutional as well, because as the description of the film reads in the catalogue of the Library of Congress Motion Picture, Recording and Sound Division: “The scene is reproduced as it actually occurred.”<sup>7</sup> As film historian Charles Musser (46) has shown, these views of war were brought to public viewing together with shorts of current American home affairs with the aim of domesticating far-away violence according to household beliefs. Hence film became a medium to convey a structured political understanding of those events, by transforming the violent eventfulness of war into a frame that supported the construction of a cultural and political narrative aiming to make sense of problems at home. Through these supposedly authentic documentaries, war truly fostered a way of seeing and it became a primordial means of visualizing issues that concerned audiences beyond and above the economy of warfare, such as the daily life in the cities, the power of technologies or the common life of Americans.

Quite remarkably the Edison Film Company’s short does not show the violence of war, but this is no impediment for audiences to interpret what is projected onto the screen as warring. The real conflict, the Spanish-American war, becomes a hidden performative, a conceptual signified without visual signifier, mimicked by the (empty) coffins as visible symbols of the invisible, albeit real, death of its victims. Enclosed within the visibility of daily life depicted in the other shorts projected in the cinematographer sessions, the “Maine” short is reduced from an exceptional interruption of normalcy into a household event. The fragmented and disparate views achieve a kind of virtual narrativity that places the common and the exceptional on equal standing. In this instance of a social construction of the visual, home, homefront and the front become one and war is normalized as a daily narrative.

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<sup>7</sup> See [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/papr:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(sawmp+1511\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/papr:@field(NUMBER+@band(sawmp+1511))), accessed on 25 January 2013.

A second strategy at work in domestication is *meta-framing*, discussed with the cue from a professional photograph taken by Anja Niedringhaus for the Associated Press, in November 2004. The shot depicts US Marines of the 1st Division dressed as gladiators at their base outside Fallujah in Iraq. Every photograph has a story and this is strikingly evocative of the sword-and-sandal film tradition. Tapped to lead an attack on insurgent-held Fallujah, the 1st Division stages a chariot race with Iraqi horses confiscated before the raid reminiscent of William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). In full character attire, these marines take up the roles of Romans and barbarians of yore staging a race of the righteous against the evildoers. The photograph was widely reproduced across the news media, but acquired a broad recognition when it was depicted in Evan Thomas and Scott Johnson's article for *Newsweek* from 12 June 2006. Entitled "Probing a Bloodbath," the piece about the investigation of the Haditha massacre used the Fallujah chariot race as rhetorical inspiration for investigative reporting on the massacre and as an instance of the power of imperial representation in the American way of leading the war. In fact, the overlapping of the imperial Roman discourse with the claim of US hegemony harks back to the beginnings of independent America and is a pervasive representation of its way of seeing the world as Amy Kaplan has convincingly argued (6).

Yet, Rome is not the only frame the picture has invoked. Serving likewise the hegemonic purpose of contrasting the good versus the bad, the civilized versus the barbarians, the photograph had more than the life it acquired within the context of *Newsweek* reporting. Two years earlier, on 7 November 2004, Agence France Presse had released a piece titled "Holy War: Evangelical Marines Prepare to Battle Barbarians." Using Niedringhaus' photograph as pictorial support, it focused on a gathering of evangelical Marines in the base outside Fallujah and on the religious overtones of the preparation for battle. The author stressed the Marines' own comparison between their situation in Fallujah and that of the Hebrews, when David was getting ready to fight the Philistines. The David episodes did become a rather recurrent trope in the self-representation of American troops in Iraq, supported by an evangelical rhetoric, smartly invoked in Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah* (2008). Despite the use of different cultural frames, both in the *Newsweek* article and in Agence France Presse's report, the image provides an indexical proof that is transformed into pictorial metaphor of narratives of power imported by the journalist into the news piece. Hence, with a loss of referentiality in the interaction with the text, the picture strikes the viewer as uncanny and lost in time.

Before a crowd of bystanders in the background, two marines run clad in blue tunics under which the white stripe of running shorts is

barely visible. While one wearing a would-be Roman helmet holds a wooden shield and a spiked club, the other follows, wearing shades, the standard Personnel Armor Ground Troops Helmet or “Fritz” for its resemblance with the German WWII helmet, a round shield and a ball mace. Neither in attire nor in choice of weaponry do they show the slightest similarity to the Roman profile suggested by *Newsweek* reporting. On the contrary, the Barbarian inspiration is clearly visible. The Marines seem to have incorporated a new persona, taking up the role of New Barbarians engaged in intimidating exercises. The photograph discloses a genealogy of Caucasian tribesmen prompting a familiar identification with commonly held views about the origins of America and its role in the defence of Western Civilization against its Others, be they the Barbarian tribes, the Philistines, or the Iraqi Fallujah insurgents. Arguably, the picture ends up as a metaframe that destabilizes photojournalism’s mandate to show whilst stressing the image’s ability to symbolize and produce metaphors that resonate with the viewer’s familiar visual narratives.

But what is the role of private family snapshots in the battlefield and how do they cater to the domestication of war? The third set of images addresses the importance of the amateur snapshot as a medium of maintaining the family bond in wartime and hence of the familial argument as a pivotal national narrative in war. As Marianne Hirsch has argued, with the dissemination of the portable camera, the photograph became the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation (7), inalienably tied to the ideology of the modern family.<sup>8</sup> For the soldier facing imminent death on the battlefield, the home is the ultimate outlet of self-identification, with the family photos playing the role of surrogates to those dearly beloved far away. Likewise the depictions of the would-be family of comrades at the front enact a triangulation of the familiar gaze that provides for a sense of ideological continuity with the family back home. During WWII, the portable camera was widely disseminated amongst fighting men. Taking Germany as a case in point, data of the German Photography Almanach shows that at least 10 percent of soldiers on the Eastern front owned a camera. Despite the strict regulations that forebode the depiction of executions,<sup>9</sup> and other mili-

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<sup>8</sup> The argument had been made earlier by Walter Benjamin in “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931).

<sup>9</sup> The general *Heeresmitteilungen* from 1940 prohibit specifically the snapping of war material, any Navy vessel, bridges, harbours and docks, fortresses and defence lines. Accidents and injuries were also off limits and very explicitly depictions of executions. However, there was nothing in the regulations to prohibit the snapping of corpses after killing, which explains the wide range of available pictures of these post-events (Schmiegelt 25) The same was the case with the Regulations of the Waffen SS which explicitly stated

tary prescriptions on weaponry or any kind of data related to the positions of the armies, photography was widely popular. The genres were prototypical: the trophy photos before prisoners and seized enemy weaponry, the landscape images of the front (German Crimea for instance) and of the seized cities, Paris ranking the most widely photographed amongst them, local inhabitants, the company comrades and daily activities. The film was usually sent home to be developed and then sent back to the fighting men at the front. Some amateur photographers sold the pictures to fellow soldiers as the many lists of reprints and own and owe rolls show.

Although the official prohibitions on photography were strong the will to show and snap was often stronger. Images of atrocities circulated both in the front and at home, side by side with snapshots of family festivities, loving children and fiancés. The contentious war crimes exhibit, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskriegs 1941-1944* (1995-1999) in fact displayed both professional and amateur images taken by German soldiers, some of them, if not kept in the official photo albums, than at least well kept in the family's war memorabilia trove. Soldiers were called on to snap at the front, as the photographs provided the "dearest connection between the front and the home."<sup>10</sup> Wives and family members were also encouraged to send back family photos. Film companies such as Agfa or Adox worked this ideology of exchange and created a number of popular adverts that stressed the symbolical link between the front and the home provided by the photograph (Jahn 73).

Clearly, the private photograph established a familial gaze between the front and the home, hence building on the constitutive force of the photograph to support the family ideology and transporting it to the wild landscape of war. It projected a screen of domestic myths, such as sorority and fraternity, warmth, mutual support, and a sense of organic belonging, whilst at the same time enhancing the hierarchical patriarchal structure that confirmed the male combatant's authority before the women, children and elderly back home. This exchange was more phatic than essential, as its aims were the maintenance of flow of communication between the families suffering under the hardships of the home-front and the soldier's vital hazard on the battlefield. A phatic stream of images helped to maintain the strict family bonds and co-opt them into the wider ideology of the national family. Once again, the familial gaze

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what should be photographed and what was strictly off limits (*Verordnungsblatt der Waffen SS*, 3/1942, no.14, 57).

<sup>10</sup> The photo inside the letter provided the "herzlichste Verbindung zwischen Front und Heimat" (Blashko 11).

in war traps the viewer, projecting the family as a mythical screen between the camera and the object and in the end justifying the violence wreaked on the front for the sake of home and country.

A photograph is an object, it bears a material life of paper and ink and is often encased. The fourth example I wish to discuss addresses the ways in which materiality prompts domestication. Let us consider the silver encased picture of a Portuguese soldier during the Colonial War (1961-1974), dressed in uniform in front of his tank. The photograph's silver casing separates the experience of war snapped in the conventional still and kept inside the frame, from the routine of home. Placed on the wall of a middle class family it simultaneously celebrates the veteran's safe return from war and reifies the violent past within the family's history. German sociologist Georg Simmel argued in the 1902 essay "Der Bildrahmen. Ein ästhetischer Versuch" that the picture frame was a model of interaction between containment and difference. For him, the frame [. . .] cannot in its configuration present a bridge or an opening, through which it could somehow enter the world or through which the world could enter the framed reality" (11). Simmel is here concerned with art's relation to the world and he posits the frame as the equivocal sign of this ambivalent relationship of containment and dialogue. The frame detaches whilst celebrating the enclosed event, experience or episode. Likewise, the encased war snapshot turns war into an object integrated into the decorative normalcy of daily life. By transporting the uncommon into the conventional in the after war period, the cased photograph incorporates war as a discursive feature of the family's private history, into its meta-photographic context, negotiated between the individual subjectivity of the private story and the general narration of collective national history.

The four examples suggest a rhetorical strategy of domestication at work in different photographic genres dealing with the experience of war, structured along four main axes: *normalization* or the inclusion of the visuality of war within the wider visuals of home affairs; *meta-framing* or the production of a deliberate loss of referentiality and privileging of metaphor; *phaticity* or a structure of communication not mainly set on producing meaning but rather on maintaining contact between home and front that works to fit photographic family communication into that of State sponsored violence; and finally *reification*, or a normalization of the war experience in the post war period by means of celebratory materializations within the home.

The domestic framing of conflict and the pervasive blur between the ideology of home and war is thus a marker of the visuality of warfare.

There are however cultural counter-practices of interference<sup>11</sup> which draw on the domestic frame to contest it. They work to render the invisible frame of home visible and support a visuality of contestation of the home ideology. Mostly, this work is done by artists, such as Martha Rosler or Nina Berman, and indeed takes place in the art gallery not in the front pages of newspapers. Yet, I suggest, the aesthetical by no means takes away the critical edge or denunciatory capability. On the contrary, as Rosler argues, at a time of wider restrictions for photojournalists, when war photography and war visuality tend to be naturalized within a wider trend to socialize violence, practices of estrangement and dissent find a privileged location in the art gallery.

#### *IV. Home(y) Wars*

Martha Rosler has been engaged with the representation of war since her early work in the 1960s, particularly the *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* series (1967-1972). Concerned with the impact the “living room war” of Vietnam and its photographic representation, Rosler set out to develop photocollages in the modernist tradition that linked the experience of war with the American homes.<sup>12</sup> She places her work at the intersection of a critique of plain indexicality, the social role of aesthetics and the ethical obligation of modern democracy. In the 1998 conference “Post-Documentary” at Rochester University she claimed:

These challenges, which radically undermine photography’s claim to a unique capacity to offer direct insight into the real and offer up structural truths about power differentials in society, have produced something of a crisis among artists and intellectuals and troubled some in journalism and the legal professions, if not others in the wider audience. My aim is to explore some of the attributes and functions of social documentary photography and to determine if it still has a place in the postmodern world.<sup>13</sup>

It was precisely a compulsion to provide aesthetics with a social dimension, which would help to heal and literally remediate the suspicion

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<sup>11</sup> The concept was coined by Hal Foster in the introduction to *The Anti-aesthetic. Postmodern culture* as a reflection of the antagonistic impact of Edward Said’s and Frederic Jameson’s theories on aesthetic postmodern practices (Foster xii).

<sup>12</sup> Rosler, who is also a Professor of Visual Culture at Rutgers, became famous in the 1970s for her feminist art and the questioning of the woman’s place in art history and theory. See for instance the “Semiotics of the Kitchen” performance (1975)

<sup>13</sup> <http://home.earthlink.net/~navva/writings/rochester.html> (accessed on 2 February 2011).

over documentary photography, that led her to work on a second series of the *Bringing the War Home* project, updated with the reality of the Iraq War. Like in the earlier 1967 series, the home is for Rosler a lethal space, deadlier perhaps than the actual battle ground for its spotless cleanliness and suggestion of perfectibility. As Laura Cottingham wrote, for Rosler, war is always home, because its imagery is not imposed or forced into the living room, it belongs there (2). By confronting the cult of objects in the sanitized imaginary of the untouchable and lifeless American home with the dirty, messy and undistinguishable reality overseas, Rosler's work presents the domestic frame as a surplus that does not work to uphold the ideology but is instead revealed as a frame that has been framed. By means of a counter-practice of interference it produces an irritation to the sanitized imaginary of home by placing the origin of the violence of war in the pristine living room or kitchen space.

For the 1967 series, Rosler worked mainly with images from *Life* magazine, and brought together spaces segmented within the publication's stream of images, letting the seamless flow of pictures from the Vietnam War plunge into the spotless imagery of home ads. In "Cleaning the Drapes," a housewife vacuums the drapes, opening up the curtains to a trench outside the window. The coloured drape functions as an open border between the routine of home and the exception of war, stressing in the contrast between the black and white photo and the coloured ad how indexicality and connotation are built into one. The home is literally presented as the stage that supports the theatre of war, with the housewife as its expert director. What is more, the exoticism of the war shots that seem in the pages of *Life* magazine to be placed in far, far away locations are transported together with its objects into the unspoiled living room.<sup>14</sup> The picture of the amputee Tron ["Tron (amputee)" 1967-1972], walking the spotless carpet or the scattered bodies outside the Giacometti home ["House Beautiful (Giacometti)" 1967-1972] present the effects of war on the real bodies of America's others. The uncanny emptiness of the living rooms contrasts with the battered bodies outside, those of the soldiers or their victims, revealing the home as a haunted space, an (in)visible hand wreaking visible violence. Argua-

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Rosler: "It was these two projected spaces, one idealized and the other cast completely into the other mode. It showed a picture of who we thought we might be if we only strove hard enough, our best selves, versus this picture of the rejected space. It just seemed like this is the way it had to be shown. It wasn't about contrasting two realities, but two world views: our ideal self and this other thing which was the unacceptable reality of another place. One suggested we had agency, that we could create this world, and the other suggested that we had no agency, that others had agency, the military or elected leaders or terrorists, though that's not the lingo of the day, other geopolitical forces. This was not an arena that we had any power over" (Cook 11).

bly, it was the *revenge* of the haunted home of America that prompted Rosler to revisit her earlier work in new robes. As she assumed in an interview, invoking Tomaso di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* (2007), the revision was about "evok[ing] a mood and invok[ing] a way of working, to say "Tout la change, tout la même chose"" (Cook 11).

For the second *Bringing the War Home House Beautiful* series Rosler set out to stress the links between consumer culture and war. She denounces the power commodities have gained over humans, indeed transforming them into mass ornaments, models in a culture of copies and simulacra supporting the tug of war in Iraq. Compellingly, the series composed by contrastive fragments (models, furniture, war footage) sets the Iraq war in a postmodern space, populated by debris and disconnected fragments, that tell a wide variety of stories from different perspectives. In the 2004 series the distance from battle is greater, as the once empty uncanny home is populated by models that appear insensitive to the violence wreaked both at home and abroad by the American military.

In "Photo Op" (Figure 2), the home is inhabited by a slender blond housewife/model that screams as she watches Saddam's face on her cell.



Figure 2. Martha Rosler: "Photo Op."  
*House Beautiful. Bringing the War Home. New Series* (2004).  
(Reproduced by kind permission of the author)



The doubling of the female model shows that the woman is a fake, as the original and the copy are indistinguishable. The female figure is a ghost image produced as commodity, a ghost scared by the simulacra image of the great monster created by the media. The home is populated by two other humans, dead Iraqi children. The ghost model and the dead children are a strange family, a counter domestic construct that subverts the family ideology. Outside the window, the Iraqi war roars in the strident red colour of explosions casting an ominous shadow over the estranged home.

This time, such as in the collage, “Walker” (2004-2007), violence is not a privilege exercised by the American “us” upon an alien “them,” but the violence of war contaminates the American soldier as well. Amputees and gymnasts are placed side by side in the living room in an uncanny contrast. While some work out to fulfil the mandate of beauty and fitness, others struggle to regain the walking ability. The contrast between the two realities shows the loss of reality pervading the contemporary world. Again, unlike the earlier work, graphic imagery of injured bodies is placed inside the home, framed by open newspapers or photo frames, and no longer situated beyond the artificial border of the living room window. The use of vivid colour popping out of the frame traps the viewer and interpellates her gaze. Referentiality is not an issue here, but rather photography becomes a hot medium destined to build affect.

Clearly, the first series works as a kind of metaframe for the second one. In “The Grey Drape” (2004-2007) the stylish allure of 1960s ads is evoked as a model waves a grey drape recalling a smoke screen of sorts to block the view of a soldier patrol in an Iraqi street, cutting to the view of a crying mother begging outside the living room window. In other instances, the new series confronts the earlier pristine house patterns, now showing a wrecked home, Saddam’s Palace, overlapped by the multiplied image of a housewife cleaning the wreck (“Saddam’s Palace,” 2004). *Tout la change, tout la même chose.*

One final piece sums up Rosler’s reverse domesticity. “Gladiators” (Figure 3) is a piece from 2004 that draws from Niedringhaus’ photograph, placed back centre to dominate the composition. The work is organized on three levels. In the centre a white couch over a white carpet is an imposing presence on the living room composition, where a policeman is placing a Caucasian male under arrest. In the left side corner a red ottoman seems to be pushed inside the frame, disturbing the pristine whiteness of the furniture. On the wall, in the background three photographs loom over the events taking place inside the house. In the centre, a blow-up of Niedringhaus’ picture rules over the composition, framed by an image of the Abu-Ghraib events on the left and the

cropped angle of what evokes an explosion in the Middle East. In the forefront two soldiers scan the home and target the viewer with their rifles. The work's title invokes the imperial narrative of the new gladiators, but the photographic composition works beyond this framing. The wall pictures show the nexus between the footage of war, on the right, imperial connotative framing and torture, on the left. The line of perspective links the performing gladiators with the two soldiers in the forefront, erecting a symbolical lineage between the performance and the daily action. What is more, the fact that one of the soldiers is aiming his gun at the viewer seems to place her as the next target in this war sequence. In fact, the photo uses the domestic frame not only as critique worthy, but moves to another level in that the home has now become the target for the militarization of the social. In the first and second series of *Bringing the War Home*, Rosler frames the home frame and, citing her earlier series, uses it as a surplus that interferes with the hegemonic discourse of domesticity. By means of reverse appropriation the home that legitimates war becomes the very site where war is negotiated and art the location where an ethics of visual antagonism takes place. In fact, her work shows how visibility is articulated not only as an antagonistic practice, but within the realm of real conflict, negotiating the right to see and show that marks democratic news photography with the visual artist's critical mandate. So that some things may change and nothing remains the same.



Figure 3. Martha Rosler: "Gladiators."  
*House Beautiful. Bringing the War Home. New Series* (2004)  
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