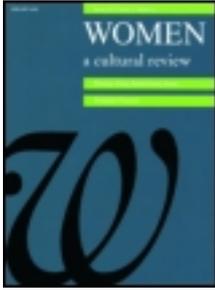


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### Knowing the Frame

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## Knowing the Frame

Judith Butler,  
*Frames of War:  
 When is Life  
 Grievable?* Verso,  
 2009, £9.99  
 paperback 978 1  
 84467 626 2.

JUDITH Butler's latest book is a continuation of her ethical philosophical project, which explores notions of 'precarious life' within the 'War on Terror'. The book contains five essays that draw upon questions of survivability, vulnerability, affect, ethics and photography, torture, sexual politics, temporality and non-violence. They are an attempt to 'expand our existing frameworks or allow them to be interrupted by new vocabularies' relating to questions of liveability and grievability, which are the 'vexed domain [and] site of a necessary struggle' of the contemporary political climate. *Frames of War* develops the questions Butler began to pose in her 2004 book, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. This work examined why 'specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living'. *Frames of War* also draws upon her work in *Undoing Gender* (2004), which explored the relationship between the human, recognition and intelligibility. An interest in exploring the sexual politics of war can similarly be found in her earlier essay, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism' (1991); these thematic and analytical strands have arguably become a central part of Butler's philosophical and political project.

In *Frames of War*, Butler situates her analysis in the frames of interpretation that mediate reality within a culture of perpetual war: the media culture of the west, which affectively, visually and discursively manages collective responses to 'life', producing differential categories of life and non-life, visible and invisible lives and, in the case of Abu Ghraib, renders torture a permissible and acceptable part of the everyday landscape. Butler locates the specific sites where 'mechanisms of power' operate to produce or negate life. She argues that the means through which the 'being' of life is constituted is a highly selective process, and one that cannot be thought of outside relations of power.

Typically, Butler's analysis utilises an impressive range of empirical and philosophical sources to construct her arguments. Hegel, Emmanuel Levinas and Melanie Klein are all familiar allies within Butler's writing, and her arguments self-consciously draw upon and move beyond these figures' work. In 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography' she presents an

extended dialogue with the late work of photographer and theorist Susan Sontag. This essay examines an ethics of photography, exploring the capacity, or incapacity, of photographs to have a ‘transitive function . . . [and] act upon viewers in ways that have a direct bearing on the kinds of judgements those viewers will have about the world’. Butler’s analysis also draws upon the poetry of Guantánamo Bay prisoners in order to examine the question of survivability in the context of war. *Frames of War* argues that to counter the pervasive individualism of the sovereign subject, we need to recognise our ‘shared precariousness’. Butler insists upon the ‘interdependency’ of subjects, based on the fact that ‘we each have the power to destroy and be destroyed, and that we are bound to each other in this power and this precariousness’.

*Frames of War* pays close attention to the concept of relationality as a means through which to understand this shared condition of precariousness: ‘life itself has to be rethought as this complex, passionate, antagonistic, and necessary set of relations to others’. Relationality is a possible way to extend the contours of liveable life, as ‘my life is nothing without the life that exceeds me, that refers to some indexical you, without whom I cannot be’. This provides fertile critical terrain in which future writers might seek to undermine, and provide an alternative to, the individualistic, bounded subject who is unable to apprehend or recognise another living, breathing life. In constituting collective understandings of political events, Butler argues, what is excluded from the frame is, of course, as important as what is included; in that it delimits what we are allowed to understand as ‘life’. As ever with Butler, these frames—although unquestionably powerful—are not static or unassailable. The point of the critical project, she argues, would not be to simply ‘locate what is “in” or “outside” the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself’. A critical project can also be situated in drawing attention to the mechanisms of frame, rendering its operations apparent, in both a visual and a sensory-affective sense. For Butler’s text is largely about response-ability; in a very literal sense our ability to have effective affective responses to violence and war in a culture framed by the media tactics fuelled by aggressive right-wing, neo-liberal, sexist, homophobic and racist political agendas. Butler is very clear in naming the specific role that the state has played in framing affective responses to violence and war, post 9/11, and how this is related to wider formations of social and political control: ‘the state works on the field of perception and, more generally, in the field of representability, in order to control affect—in anticipation of the way that affect is structured by interpretation, but structures interpretation as well’. Importantly, the framing of the ‘claim

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upon me' that Butler presents as necessary to apprehend another life, is made 'through the senses, which are crafted in part through various forms of media, the social organization of sound and voice, of image and voice, of tactility and smell'. *Frames of War* offers a number of important frameworks for engaging with the pressing political questions and problems of our times, in particular notions of injurability, survivability, relationality, affect and response-ability. Butler presents a number of tools and perspectives that are wholly relevant, practical and humbling to read, and her analysis can be applied and developed in multi-disciplinary contexts. This book deserves a wide readership.