

**War Crimes, Atrocity and Justice**, by Michael J. Shapiro,  
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Human history has been witness to many war crimes and atrocities. But it is only in the twentieth century that one sees institutionalised, global attempts to fix responsibility for such crimes and to bring justice to the victims of such unspeakable, horrific crimes against humanity. However, most would agree that these attempts have hardly made a huge difference either in getting justice for victims and giving them closure or in deterring such crimes. Through *War Crimes, Atrocity, and Justice*, Michael J. Shapiro challenges our traditional understanding about war crimes and atrocities through the skilful use of selections from modern literature and the world of films.

Shapiro, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawaii, uses an innovative approach to understanding the discursive practices through which we understand dominant images about war crimes, atrocity and justice. He uses examples from literature, films and television series to contrast the justice-related imagery we see to raise questions about atrocities and justice. He ‘mobilises political and philosophical concepts and deploys them on global spaces, forces, and events, primarily (but not exclusively) as they are articulated through artistic texts’ (p. 1). His justification for such an approach is that it provokes critical thinking and evinces a ‘literary justice’ as opposed to ‘legal justice’ (p. 1). Fiction, he says, can provide ‘an angle of vision’ that provokes thinking, instead

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of offering 'definitive knowledge judgements' (p. 2). Shapiro uses literary montage to show connections among parallel forces and events rather than elaborately explaining how they interrelate (p. 3).

The author begins by reflecting on Zadie Smith's story, 'The Embassy of Cambodia', which indirectly talks about war crimes. The story shows a transversality between national regimes and atrocities experienced by migrant domestic servants (p. 5). In the first chapter, 'The Global Justice Dispositif', Shapiro uses Mathias Enard's novel, *Zone*, which is about the prosecution of individuals by the International Tribunal for erstwhile Yugoslavia, to bring out the tension between justice and realpolitik and the contradiction between peace seeking and justice seeking (p. 16). He also brings in the concept of 'global audiography—the sites from which authorities are called to account in official statements'. An example of this is the United States' (US) silence over mass killing of protestors by Egypt in 2013 because 'Egypt's strategic importance' for the US was trumping humanitarian considerations (p. 25). He says that often geopolitical considerations compromise justice. He also gives the example of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces, which are apparently sent to secure peace and justice, and their use of trafficked women.

Chapter 2 on 'Atrocity, Securitization, and Exuberant Lines of Flight' explores ontologies of life and the apparatus through which forms of life are securitised (p. 49). In this chapter, he uses the television series, *Nip/Tuck*, in which people go through plastic surgeries to make their bodies more attractive. Shapiro ties this debate to Hitler's extermination campaigns in Europe during World War II and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, which are both about preventing miscegenation and ethnic pollution (p. 66).

Chapter 3, titled 'What does a Weapon See', was for me the most interesting as it is about the concept of 'empathic vision'. Here, the author makes the important point that as we use more technologically high-end weapons, sometimes the weapons themselves make targeting decisions. A case in point is the shooting down of the Iranian passenger plane in 1988 by the *USS Vincennes*. It is said that the decision to launch the missile was taken by the ship's Aegis System which could not distinguish between an airbus and a fighter plane (pp. 86–87). Shapiro offers several examples, from television series to books, to show how soldiers get disconnected from reality when they wield such weapons. For example, marines participating in the Iraq War saw themselves as being part of a series of video games (p. 92), perhaps making it easier for them to dehumanise

and kill Iraqis. Shapiro also touches upon the use of predatory drones which give militaries the advantage of 'total deniability'. Drones help militaries because the killers or drone pilots do not see the results of what they did to their targets (p. 113) and therefore do not feel guilt. Drones work at a great, risk-free distance and drone pilots are not always well trained. Shapiro gives the astounding example of a boy who was recruited as a drone pilot merely because of his video gaming skills (p. 111). The level of mediation which the drone provides allows anonymous killings through a process in which the killers and those who authorise them are epistemologically, physically and perpetually remote (p. 112), presenting grave ethical questions.

In Chapter 4 on 'Borderline Justice', Shapiro turns again to artistic texts and films to talk about insecurity and policing of inter-state borders caused by narcotics trade and enforcement. The final chapter, 'Justice and the Archives', as the title suggests, is about the archiving of injustice. The author uses the question raised by Jacques Ranciere: 'how do you recognise that a person is talking about justice and not his/her private pain?', to drive home his point about the problems in identifying injustice. Ranciere's question involves the politics of recognition. How do tribunals select evidence and testimony? This shows the problem of justice as an ethico-political negotiation in which the list of potentially qualified participants cannot be closed (p. 184). The author also raises the issue of our responsibility to those who have yet to be heard (p. 184). Shapiro argues that the reason why war crimes and atrocities are hidden is not only because of suppression by government-controlled media but also due to 'psychic suppressions of the phenomenology of everyday life' (p. 184).

Shapiro, through his exposition of various films, novels, paintings and television series, succeeds in exposing the contradiction between aesthetically oriented approaches and more conventional images and approaches to crimes and atrocities. Through each chapter in the book, he is able to delineate different notions and perspectives of justice. He also tests the established impressions about war crimes and atrocities. The book is useful for students of international law, international relations, cultural and media studies, as well as human rights activists. It would also be of interest to film-goers and film-makers. However, the excessive use of academic jargon and the use of cross-cultural references and concepts with which not everyone might be familiar can make the book a tedious read.

