

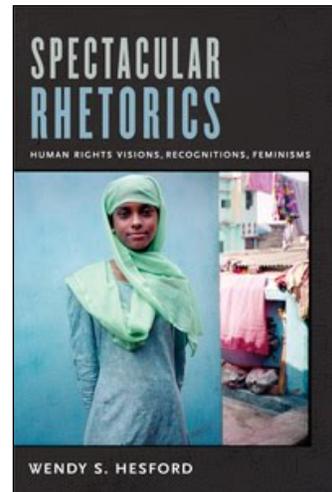
Wendy S. Hesford, **Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 296 pp., \$21.56 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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In the aftermath of the 10-year anniversary of 9/11 when the media saturated the American public with repeated images of the trauma the nation endured, several questions emerged from the visual ashes: What narratives have the reconstructions of that collective trauma succeeded in communicating? What nationalisms, cultural values, and moralisms do they instill or reinforce? How do photos, documentaries, and other story-telling devices inform an audience's perception not only of trauma in world events but also of their position in relation to these events? There is a narcissism and a politics embedded in such cultural reenactments, as well as in the conditions of their construction. Such "spectacular rhetorics" are the subject of Wendy S. Hesford's new book, which explores the way representations of suffering are used to influence audiences in human rights advocacy movements and campaigns.



Spectacular Rhetorics seeks to disentangle—or at least, introduce—the complex role of the spectator in human rights discourse. Hesford explains that the communicative practices of human rights discourses often employ an inherent power dynamic between the spectator and the “spectacle” (or subject) of the human rights abuse. The audience for such abuses is implicated in this book, as Hesford seeks to show that often spectators are portrayed as the “holders of rights,” who are in positions, by virtue of their gazing upon the subjects of the human rights violation, to bestow rights, justice, or morality on those subjects. Hesford describes this process of bestowing as a power imbalance that is sometimes laden with multiple meanings and politicized agendas and sometimes merely an unconscious manifestation of larger structures of social, cultural, and national power inequities playing out within the human rights discourse itself.

Differentiating between image and narrative as rhetorical constructs, Hesford contends, to put it simply, that context is everything. Her argument is that activists, scholars, and artists (categories that she explains are not mutually exclusive) must “call into question the normative frameworks that govern subject formation and the scenes of suffering, as well as the recognition scenes in human rights discourse” (p. 46). The book also explores the visual as a method that human rights activists and scholars use to create a scenario of witnessing.

Hesford argues that spectacles of suffering in human rights campaigns often distract audiences away from “everyday” rights violations of poverty and other abuses. Focusing on terrorism, rape warfare, global sex work, and the sentimentalizing of childhood in human rights campaigns, she demonstrates the way in which such issues are positioned and rhetoricized, as well as how “human rights spectacles”

associated with these issues incorporate subjects—be they individuals, communities, or nations—into imaging and messaging frameworks dedicated to promoting a UN-based human rights paradigm and western values more broadly. In Hesford's words,

The human rights spectacle . . . refers not to individual images, iconic or otherwise, but to social and rhetorical processes of incorporation and recognition mediated by visual representation and the ocular epistemology . . . that underwrites the discourse of human rights. The term also encompasses appropriations of human suffering in activist, cultural, and legal contexts, as well as western democratic nations' use of images to deflect attention from their own human rights violations by turning other nations into spectacles of violence (Chow, 1991), mapping the world in terms of spectator zones and sufferer zones (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 83). (p. 7)

Spectacular Rhetorics presents case studies of artistic projects with human rights-oriented agendas from the genres of documentary film, theater, photography, and memorials. The case studies draw attention to the "visual politics of recognition, and to the formation of ethical engagements" (p. 199), cautioning western audiences and people in privileged positions not to "celebrate difference" in a way that recenters themselves.

One of the strongest cases explored in Hesford's book is the analysis of the Abu Ghraib prison photos, which she describes as "staged spectacles" of terror that "scripted citizens of the United States as both victims of terrorism and agents of a newly imagined, ultranationalist state entrenched in stereotypical representations of the Muslim other and scenes of cultural subjection" (p. 61). Importantly, Hesford insists that we look beyond the view of the Abu Ghraib photos as pornographic images in themselves and recognize the repetitive analysis of these photos by scholars, journalists and others as, in itself, a ritualized pornographic act. Describing this process as an "overdose of the antidote" (p. 84), she warns against the dangers of traumatic repetition in which more harm is being done to reinforce inequality and objectify the experience of the other. Echoing Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Hesford implicates the audience of the photography spectacle in his or her seemingly "innocent" act of "viewing" world events and urges the viewer—and here, she is referring quite clearly to the American viewer—to engage self-reflexively in the act of gazing. Evoking the ethical responsibility of the spectator, Hesford calls for

An ethical rhetorical vision that critically engages the norms and theoretical narratives that characterize the transnational human rights imaginary, particularly as these norms and narratives shape processes of cultural and legal recognition—an ethos based not on philosophical universalism but on an awareness of the historical contingencies and rhetorical exigencies of ethical responsibility in its entanglement with institutional structures and individual lives. (p. 190)

Such a call for consciousness is critically important; however, one can't help but ask how such consciousness on the part of a viewer can be operationalized when, as is made clear in the many cases explored in the book, viewers rely on the creators of messages to educate and direct their emotional attention. With ethics as Hesford's primary goal, these questions must be asked: How necessarily

complicit are audiences in this call for self-reflexivity? Is it the job of all spectators to critically examine their active gaze, or should such responsibility be held solely by message and media creators—be they news makers, campaign designers, documentary filmmakers, composers, or playwrights? Such a dilemma also calls the complexly negotiated relationships of power between artists, journalists, and audiences into question: Do message creators primarily reinforce audience expectations, or do they have the power to create them?

Again, context is everything in the author's view. As she constructs a paradigm of the performative aspects of advocacy and its (unknowing) collusion with the imperial and masculinist agenda of American nationalism, Hesford succeeds in problematizing the issue of spectatorship in human rights discourses. This problem, however, never quite gets solved. She also notes the importance of the documentary and artistic works she is critiquing, reminding the reader that it is not her place to judge the content of the actual human rights abuse nor to unpack the content of the discourse. It is the communicative act that frustrates and fascinates her, and in critiquing these methodologies, she seems reticent to do more than advise the "spectacle-creators" to be more self-aware in their messaging strategies. While urging message creators to be more sensitive to the complexities and power dynamics embedded in their narratives, Hesford, at times, misses opportunities to offer alternative methods for self-reflexivity. Art, after all, is an emotional medium. The difficulty of crafting messages responsibly and self-critically through such emotional channels is not an easy task and certainly not one that can be formulaically employed. The author seems well aware of this challenge and cautiously avoids offering a single, neat solution.

Despite the unanswered questions that *Spectacular Rhetorics* raises, some actionable conclusions may be drawn from the book. Namely, artists and message creators need to view their social consciousness through a wider lens, employ new story-telling strategies, and even, perhaps, find new modes of engagement with the subjects of the "human rights spectacles" to whom they seek to give voice. Most important, Hesford's insistence that we turn the gaze onto ourselves must be heeded if truth is to be valued within human rights discourses and movements. In the spirit of liberation psychology which seeks to expose "spectacular" acts of bystanding through a holistic understanding of collective trauma (see Watkins & Shulman, 2008), such a call for the transformation of passive spectator to active witness demands that truth-telling actors of all kinds embrace more self-reflexive and critically conscious relationships with the subjects of their narratives, and reflect deeply on their research methodologies and representational choices. That is, indeed, a tall order for artists, activists, and scholars, but one certainly worth undertaking.