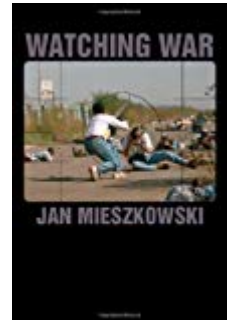


Jan Mieszkowski. *Watching War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 256 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-8239-5.



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When asking a civilian, a statesman, and a combat veteran to define “war,” one will get three entirely different answers. Defining war can be difficult for anyone, regardless of their first-hand experience in battle or the literature they have been exposed to. The main argument that Jan Mieszkowski presents is that “war has been defined by the interconnection of the devices used to wage it and the devices used to view it” (p. 5). In *Watching War*, he progresses from the simple explanations or the narrow views of some authors to the complexity of understanding total war.

The first chapter looks at written accounts and perspectives on war using the Napoleonic wars, specifically the Battle of Waterloo, as the setting. The work of such authors as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are explored. In the second chapter, the focus shifts from written accounts to personal experiences of the Napoleonic wars. Mieszkowski examines a broad range of examples, including first-hand accounts of different battles and fictional works, such as Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1948).

The chapter concludes by examining Jeff Wall’s panoramic painting *Restoration* (1993) and discusses how an image can guide a viewer to understand war. This look at paintings segues into chapter 3 where Mieszkowski explores the ability of photographs to elicit an emotional response and lead to a definition of war. Here the author transitions from the setting of the Napoleonic era to a broader approach. Famous photographs from the Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War (*Saigon Execution* [1968] by Eddie Adams) are investigated. Methods of portraying combat include staged photographs depicting death and photographs capturing the moment of death. The last chapter discusses total war, not by examining mass mobilization of industry and people but by looking at how to best describe or conceptualize total war. Through analysis of William Faulkner’s *A Fable* (1954), among other notable references, and the setting of World War I, Mieszkowski explains how “the First World War became the impetus for the modern theorization of total war” (p. 147). While this work is well researched and

key points are presented in great detail, it can be a difficult read as some background knowledge of combat photography and of publications by many of the authors who are referenced is needed in order to understand the arguments made in each chapter.

In the first chapter, Mieszkowski examines how and by whom a war story can best be told. Is the best story the first-hand account of a great leader like Napoleon or a description by someone who has only their sense of hearing to guide their thoughts and ideas? Mieszkowski analyzes three approaches to tell a war story. The first suggests that battles have a decisive point or defining moment that all events lead up to. Through examination of John A. Lynn's *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (2003) and J. Christopher Herold's work *The Mind of Napoleon: A Selection of His Written and Spoken Words* (1961), Mieszkowski concludes that a "battle [should] be considered entirely in its own terms" according to Napoleonic doctrine (p. 41). The second approach draws primarily on the work of Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* (1862) and suggests that the best way to understand warfare, and in this instance the Battle of Waterloo, is through a detailed account of the action that unfolds during a particular battle. Mieszkowski explains that it is important to contemplate how fragile a battlefield is and how quickly an outcome can be altered with subtle changes in the environment. The third approach involves visiting a battlefield as a spectator long after the cessation of hostilities. Through this process, an individual can understand warfare and gain a broader perspective through the gift of hindsight. The point Mieszkowski makes is that written accounts create an idea of warfare, an emotional connection to it, that differs from a visit to a battlefield. To bring this concept into context and appeal to the reader of popular military history, a comparison could be made to Americans who visit Civil War battlefields hoping to find

the same connection they find through a written account of the Battle of Gettysburg, for example.

Taking the concept of experiencing war a little further in the second chapter, the sources referenced challenge those searching for a definition of war to think of it in a broader sense. Readers are encouraged to use their own ideas to define warfare rather than focusing on a specific account of a particular battle. Mieszkowski explains that a holistic perspective of war or a battle cannot be explained fully by someone who was there and lived through it. The written account must bring in other unrealized aspects so that the whole battle can be compared to a standard that may or may not be tangible. We see this explored in detail in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) through the eyes of the main character Pierre. Mieszkowski could have taken this analysis further by comparing a fictional character with the experiences of a modern soldier. The ignorance Pierre has regarding the historical significance of the Battle of Waterloo is quite similar to perhaps a junior soldier's understanding of the historical significance of the Global War on Terror. While participating in a modern military campaign, a soldier serving at the lowest echelon is typically focused on his specific task and accomplishing his unit's assigned mission. Understanding strategic implications tied to performance are likely misunderstood or of little concern to the individual soldier. Mieszkowski uses another Napoleonic era example: the perspective of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who wrote about his personal experience of fighting in the Napoleonic wars. Defining war through the perspective of Goethe is difficult though, as he wrote little about actual combat and more about his everyday experiences. During battle, either he was focused on his duties or his mind kept him from comprehending the graveness of the near-death situations he found himself in.

According to Mieszkowski, comprehending what a soldier experiences when faced with near-

death or the historical significance of a major battle might be accomplished through viewing a panoramic painting or photograph of a battle scene. The chapter on photography takes an in-depth look at the power of staged photographs as well as those described as “instant-of-death” images, using Civil War and Vietnam War examples. Whereas staged photographs focus on encouraging a viewer to draw on their own thoughts and concept of war elicited through the photograph, the instant-of-death photographs leave little room for imagination. Each type brings to light the horror experienced in combat, but the question the viewer must answer is how does a person interpret or feel about war after viewing a dead soldier? Mieszkowski highlights again how a viewer can be misled and fail to effectively define warfare as some photographs cause the viewer to focus solely on the violent act portrayed in the image. Mieszkowski eventually concludes that viewing a photograph depicting combat does not elicit as powerful an emotional response as reading a written account of battle.

To see the bigger picture, the term used to define war from a broader perspective is “total war.” This does not refer to the waging or conduct of war but the imagining of warfare in its entirety. This differentiation is not made in the book, but would have been helpful to understanding the direction that the author takes in the analysis contained in chapter 4. According to Mieszkowski, the person best suited to portray what warfare is in a total sense is someone who has not actually experienced what they are writing about. A distinct line is drawn from the actualized warfare experienced in the First World War to the type of warfare envisioned during the Cold War. The author states that conceptualizing total war became so widespread during the twentieth century that it penetrated deep into American society. He posits that warfare has gone from being an element of our culture to now being a defining aspect of it. It is this aspect of defining warfare that has seen American society turn quite militaristic, so much

that people today are conditioned to a particular response or understanding of what they think warfare is. Mieszkowski examines modern warfare movies briefly, but highlights the fact that documentaries and live-action footage of warfare unfortunately do not have the same dramatic power and scripted narrative arc of the representation an audience gets from a fictional movie. While the author provides few references to the current conflicts that modern armies are engaged in, he challenges readers to look deeper at understanding how they define war; he encourages readers to seek out primary source documents and combat photography to help them think about and understand war.

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