

Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around Me: Masochism, Militarism and the Gulf War on TV

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The United States' war with Iraq, despite its rather ignominious conclusion, produced one durable souvenir. As the American flags quietly came down, as corporations stopped trumpeting their defense contracts in full-page ad "tributes" to Operation Desert Storm, and as public thoughts turned to tax paying and the federal deficit, the yellow ribbons remained. They were tied to trees and fences, at the entrances to diners and supermarkets, in wreath-like door ornaments, and on the lapels and in the hair—of women.

The ribbons signified, first of all, a concern for the individual soldiers who were in the Persian Gulf. This traces to their popularization in Tony Orlando and Dawn's 1973 song "Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree," which expressed a Vietnam soldier's plea to his sweetheart to remember him while he was away (although popular sentiment traces the yellow ribbon custom at least to John Ford's *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and even to Civil War custom). Thus historically they appeal specifically to women, and specifically to women as sexually faithful stay-at-homes whose constancy is crucial to the morale of individual soldiers, and hence of the military as a whole. Because of the persistent myth that returning Vietnam veterans' lives were destroyed by the country's hostile welcome home, the admonition now comes laden with guilt. The yellow ribbon represents a conflation of sexual constancy and family stability with patriotism.

As we were told again and again during the Persian Gulf war, the ribbons did not necessarily imply support for the war. However, their admonition to support the troops functioned to censor critics of the war. An inversion of the yellow ribbon logic, which states that individual remembrance would support the morale of the entire military, suggested that to criticize the war would damage the morale of those soldiers fighting it and would recreate in a new generation the broken souls of Vietnam. Thus the yellow ribbons became the prime icon for rallying behind the war. We cannot know what percentage of women in the U.S. actually rallied behind the war, and we cannot be sure what ribbon-tying meant to the people who did it. We must also acknowledge that men too were out in the front yard hanging those strips of yellow

plastic, or recommending that their employees sport ribbons. But the yellow ribbon phenomenon signifies a sort of involvement in the war that is specifically associated with women, and I find this phenomenon immensely curious. Why was the war with Iraq, undoubtedly a masculine affair, most tenaciously invoked in this sentimental and “feminine” manner? And how, if a majority of women opposed the war before it began (according to national polls), were so many finally convinced to support it?

Cynthia Enloe’s study, *Does Khaki Become You?*, stresses the importance of appealing to women in the perpetuation of militarized societies. She writes:

Militaries need women—but they need women to behave as the gender “women.” This always requires the exercise of control. Military officials and allies in civilian elites have wielded their power to perpetuate those gendered processes that provide the military its manpower. This is what is so strikingly revealed in the experiences of women who have been used as the military’s prostitutes, rape victims, wives, widows, social workers, nurses, soldiers, defence workers and mothers.¹

Analyzing how “military elites” have controlled women over the centuries, Enloe shows how the roles created for women shift and often come into conflict with each other. For example, encouraging women to enlist in the shrinking armed forces is a delicate task. The identity of a female soldier must be made attractive to women without damaging the legitimacy of women’s traditional supportive roles, without which the military cannot survive. Enloe published *Does Khaki Become You?* in 1983, when the Reagan/Thatcher new cold war was gaining momentum, and her analysis is specific to those circumstances. However, even if the specific contradictions are different now, the mix of images of confident and abject women on television during the Gulf war seems to illustrate a similar juggling of contradictory roles for women in a military society in 1991.

It is not through a repressive exercise of control that women take on these various supporting roles; rather, the roles are made desirable. Political change is achieved through an appeal to different constituencies, with different claims on their allegiance. This appeal must continually transform itself, much as advertising changes to incorporate market research, in order to continually enlist new alliances and maintain old ones. For example, the particular conjunction of patriarchal, nationalistic, militaristic, and capitalist values that so overburdened the yellow ribbon this past year appealed to and constructed a particular feminine identity. My goal here is to describe some mechanisms through which this identity was made attractive.

At first glance it seems that the war coverage has nothing to offer female spectators. Fast-forwarding through six hours of nonstop coverage creates the impression of a single, flickering, male talking head—a composite of anchors, reporters, Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, military and weapons “experts,” and on-site reporters—interrupted by maps, diagrams, and the sputtering green lights of dropping bombs. The relative scarcity of images of women suggests that the war coverage was a huge buddy film: a spectacle by, between, and about men. Even when women, as in “women and children,” are an excuse for the activity, it really has everything to do with an exchange between men. Steve Neale has suggested that the appeal of war movies, westerns, and gangster films is that they permit men a variety of looks at other men.² I would suggest that the torrent of information about various weapons, the interviews with the men who deploy them, and the distant spectacles in which they destroy their targets allow the (implicitly male) spectator to identify from start to finish with the heroic action of the war, satisfying his voyeuristic curiosity, identification, and fetishistic gaze. The male spectator of the war is invited to identify with the hyper-masculine military figures and the authoritative anchormen on the TV screen as though confronting his “better” self (an identification that also has a masochistic moment, when the spectator becomes aware of his inadequacies in relation to the image). However, the thirsty gaze ascribed to the masculine spectator of war is not implicated as homoerotic—not only because of the violence of the events, as in the films Neale talks about, but because of the “serious” nature of watching the news. It would seem that “masculine” spectators could find a wealth of identifications in the television war coverage.

But the coverage almost completely excluded women as objects and subjects of reportage; and thus made “feminine” identification difficult. Yet since women—or the subjects continually reconstructed as “women”—vote, buy, and otherwise exercise citizenship, women viewers were necessary participants in the war and its representation on TV. And since women appeared dramatically to reverse their opposition to the war shortly after it began, television, among other sites of cultural negotiation, must have had some boosterish effect. The question remains then, how did television news coverage of the war solicit “women’s” support, and indeed how did it carve out a place for female viewers at all?

I believe a large part of the answer is that the war coverage participated in a militarization of femininity. Like other wars, the Gulf war depended upon a specific appeal to women as the upholders of the family, loyal to the degree that they will support the people they care

about and turn a blind eye to seemingly more distant political issues. Yet the tension around conflicting roles for women that Enloe describes is also evident in the contradictory subject positions available for women in the television coverage of the war. Many positions for female spectators were available in the war news, and a few were promoted by the news itself. The position the coverage seemed most to encourage, however, was a masochistic form of spectatorship that emphasized the female viewer's role as part of a national family.

In addition, especially in this war, the antiseptic quality of most of the war coverage, the *lack* of carnage and visible destruction, denied some of the pleasurable resolution desired by a masculine viewing perspective. This lack of visible resolution seemed to require compensation in an emotional outlet—which was also the locus of female identification.

The television coverage during the war was, of course, voluminous. For economy's sake I will be looking at a fairly self-contained text: the news coverage of the war on one network and its local affiliate for about 24 hours after the war began. Although each network has a slightly different slant on the news and specific events, especially interviews and local stories, I believe that this sort of close reading will identify patterns that hold more or less around the dial.

My protestation above to the contrary, there would be a surprisingly large amount of material to study if I isolated every sequence in the war coverage in which women appeared. Women in the armed forces unprecedentedly working alongside men; young women in the reserves giving up their babies to the care of relatives; Kuwaiti women swathed in black; Israeli women preparing for Scud attacks; worried military families; women at peace demonstrations; authoritative spokeswomen for embassies, airlines, religious groups; schoolgirls; White House correspondents; newscasters and reporters; all the women in advertisements—these images show that women were actually well represented (in terms of numbers) in the war coverage. Some were even fairly far up television's hierarchy of authority, at the summit of which stand heads of state, "experts" (in news and in advertising), and network anchors. Together they create a complex and contradictory web of possible "feminine" identifications. Not that all these images equally invite identification; in a conventional reading, the authoritative presenters of the news control which figures are sympathetic. I will look at moments of the war news that focus on women "as the gender 'women,'" since it is here that the militarization of femininity takes place—with special attention to the mediating role of female news presenters.

Masochism, which has been theorized as a primary form of female spectatorship, is also a key aspect of militarized femininity. As Enloe argues, militaries have existed on the contradiction of appearing completely male but being dependent on a cooperative female presence. The behind-the-scenes women of the military—those who work for free on the base, reinforce (male) soldiers' masculinity, train the next militarized generation, join the army for its nontraditional gender roles only to have their sexuality policed—are thus in a structure that effaces them even as they are integral to it. This sacrificial character associated with a militarized society provides the emotional appeal of many of the women portrayed on television news. Whether they are family of military people or simply concerned women-on-the-street, it is women—their mourning, prayers, and determined cheerfulness—that allow television viewers to face the threat of loss. And through a masochistic identification, we viewers are encouraged to take on the same burden of caring.

Mary Ann Doane has written of films directed at female viewers made during the war years of the 1940s.³ She finds that films with female protagonists thwart both the "transvestite" and the narcissistic forms of identification. By taking the focus away from male characters, "women's films" impede identification with a male protagonist; but because they de-eroticize the female body, they also prevent female spectators from identifying with the object of the gaze. Doane notices, in addition, that the protagonists always come to grief in some way—through sickness, paranoiac entrapments, or martyrdom. Yet these are the situations that afford the female spectator (a tearful) pleasure, "often indissociable from pain."⁴ Doane concludes that the primary way a woman identifies with these films is masochistically. "The 'woman's film' thus functions in a rather complex way to deny the woman the space of a reading. . . . It functions quite precisely to immobilize."⁵

Paradoxically, an apparently "women's" medium actually denies the subjectivity of a female viewer even more completely than conventional male-identified Hollywood films do. What draws a female spectator to this implacably flattened screen space? Doane will suggest later that the female spectator need not be "drawn in," because she was never completely pruned away. In the tradition of Lacanian psychoanalysis, "what the woman lacks is lack, the ability to represent for herself a distance from the body which is the prerequisite for desire."⁶ This closeness to the object, Doane writes, disables fetishism and voyeurism as options for the female spectator.

Freud connected hysteria with the power to identify: identification allows patients "to suffer on behalf of a whole crowd of people."⁷

The stoic, threatened, bereft, and far from erotic women who occur throughout the war coverage provide a localized expression of pain. One of the most available ways for a viewer to identify with the events onscreen is just that over-closeness that is masochistic, cathartic, and ultimately disabling. Yet the hysteric's suffering, by acknowledging a pain felt across the family or community or state, allows the painful situation to continue, safely vented. Through the mixing of genres that occurs on TV, the women in pain—and the spectators who identify with them—provide an emotional outlet for the coverage as a whole. They are an enabling condition for the massive and distanced violence that prevails elsewhere.

WROC-TV, CBS's local affiliate in Rochester, calls upon images of women to provide "tragic relief" in one of the first station breaks from the network's barrage of reportage from the Gulf, military experts gesturing at maps, and the cold light of bombs striking their targets. In the most banal and seemingly unrehearsed ways—as if the interviewees just happened to be in the TV station lobby—this episode establishes an opposition between masculine ethics and aggression, on the one hand, and an uncritical feminine softheartedness. One father says he would explain the war to his daughter by saying, "We need to stand by our principles; our principles are better than [Saddam Hussein's]." A young man says rather stiffly, "We have to rally around our country and our president. There's no more time for peace demonstrations." Another can barely conceal his excitement: "I guess it's gotta be done, and I don't know how to do it right or wrong but—just have to flatten the country. It's gonna be just a real crying shame." Last a woman in her forties speaks: "I looked in the paper at all those faces [the local newspaper printed photographs of servicemen and women in Saudi Arabia], and there's a boy in there who looks 16"—with tears in her voice—"he was 21, but he looked so innocent, you know, it hurts me to know that these people are over there." It is as though this woman's mourning is the condition for the others' ability to deliver patriotic platitudes with a stiff upper lip; she is made to act as the group conscience, as is the viewer, by extension.

Such images of women in pain—women suffering on behalf of others—give female viewers a way to identify that allows them to "do their part" in the national mobilization, without overtly involving themselves in support of the war. Yet the selflessness they imply is integral to the ideal of militarized femininity, which in turn is necessary to public support of the war and of wars in general. An interview on CBS, a few hours into the war coverage, upholds this ideal in a riff on the theme of masochistic identification. Correspondent Gary Reaves meets with some wives of members of the 82nd Airborne Division,

one of the first military outfits to see action, at the base in Fort Bragg, South Carolina. He interviews Barbara Hewitt and Debbie Kamps, whose husbands are a wing commander and a flight commander. Dwarfed in their powder-blue armchairs, these two white women maintain a smiling, tight-lipped composure throughout the interview, which characteristically is composed of "feeling" questions. Hewitt replies as though by rote to Reaves's initial query about how they are coping: "We're very optimistic, we feel very confident that our troops are well trained, and we are happy to hear the good news that things have gone well." She tells Reaves that she heard that the war had begun when she was leaving for a party for some of the women on the base and that she "continued on." "I talked to a group of our ladies and let them know that the guys were prepared and no news was good news, and just to keep your spirits up, and I was here if they needed me and everyone on base and in the town was here to support us." The look of apprehension in Hewitt's eyes belies her words, but she cleaves to the wives of the 82nd Airborne as though her separate fears are nothing.

For her part, Kamps offers that "I've kind of put my meaning into the word 'cope.' It's Caring, Compassion with your family and friends, Observing Others, Praying and Preparing myself, and Each day I feel I have the strength and Energy to go on." Kamps's word choice is interesting in light of an observation by Enloe:

Sometimes military officials prefer to ignore the consequences of the ideological cracks in the system. They prefer to leave individual women to cope with the cross pressures on their own. . . . Military male elites much prefer to leave it up to individual "coping," because down through the centuries they have sought to *use* women while all the time *denying* their dependence upon women.⁸

Coping, Enloe suggests, is a strategy for surviving a situation that cannot afford to acknowledge one's existence.

Kamps and Hewitt are heroically feminine in dealing with the contradiction between concern for their husbands and patriotic support for their husbands' line of work. The hysterical ability to suffer on others' behalf seems to be a necessary attribute of military wifehood: they sacrifice their individual fears, selfishness, and desires in order to serve their community and country. Although they are called on to represent "family" to the television audience, they hardly appeal even to their own families in their earnest speeches. Instead they focus on the family of the base and, by extension, of other military supports around the country. Hewitt says "we," not "I," and "our troops," not "my husband." They even invoke other women's fear—"being there"

for the other wives, "observing others"—yet are unable to acknowledge their own. Enloe notes that "a military wife . . . lives under the authority of an institution which often portrays itself as a 'family,' thus making her subject to two patriarchal authorities: her husband's and the military commander's."⁹ These military wives demonstrate that it is their duty to conflate the two, while masochistically effacing their own wills and desires. Thus, while this interview arouses in the (implicitly female) spectator a powerful identification with the suffering of other women, it also implicates her in the nationwide militarized "family."

A slightly earlier interview with a Fort Bragg wife, however, fairly bristles with tension between the newscasters' projected image of (selfless) national unity and her own stubborn separateness. Connie Chung, national mood-barometer extraordinaire, has just reported on the range of national support of and opposition to the war. When she blandly concludes her survey with the observation that in every war "there are some who are just more antiwar than others are," CBS anchor Dan Rather jumps in warmly with an exhortation to support the military. "That is such a good point. . . . Time and again on my trips to the Persian Gulf, soldiers, sailors, airmen would say, 'Don't let 'em at home fail to support us.'" Over-confidently (on the basis of Chung's evidence, at least), Rather observes that this time the Vietnam syndrome is not happening: "People have been able to make that differentiation [between individual soldiers and the war] in their mind, and we can say to our U.S. military people, 'The public is behind you, even those that don't support the policy.'"

We turn immediately to Gary Reaves's interview with the military wives at Fort Bragg, the first such interview on CBS since the war began. It starts with military wife Linda Eichelberger. Over a shot of three black women watching Bush's speech on television (Eichelberger and two unidentified others), Reaves (who is also black) contradicts Rather's optimism: "Their mood was somber, and the women are questioning whether the president's goals are worth their husbands' making the ultimate sacrifice." He introduces Eichelberger as someone "frightened that her son may have to grow up without his father." Eichelberger makes no attempt to hide her fear for her husband, a helicopter pilot: "When I turned the television on and heard the news I just felt totally devastated. . . . How can you console a friend when you know you feel the same way she feels?" Unlike the other two women at Fort Bragg discussed earlier, where they talk of going to a "chamber party" to cheer up the other wives, Eichelberger speaks of her aloneness. Although she is up front about her pain and fear, she refuses to be a martyr precisely because she indulges these feelings so completely.

Eichelberger also refuses to be part of a national family. She tells Reaves, "I support my husband 100%. I support him in the job he does. But if he does not come back home I cannot sit here and say I am happy and proud that he is fighting for America, because I just can't see it. The only thing I am concerned about right now is, I have a son here. If my husband does not come back, what's going to happen to my child?" Unlike Hewitt and Kamps, Eichelberger does not speak of "the guys" and "our troops" but of "my husband." She will not deny herself in order to function in the masochistic chain that would link other families with her and link her husband with the nation. Reaves hastens to normalize her protest by putting it in context: "It is certain that Linda Eichelberger doesn't speak for all the army wives. We have talked to many here who say that they fully support the president's policy. But politics aside, one thing they all do agree on right now" is that they want Saddam Hussein to surrender.

In this exchange the practice of exhibiting a female martyr as an object of identification for women seems to have backfired. The strategy of appealing to the general image of the family in order to distract from the political issues of war fails. In the gap between the vague issues of patriotism and solidarity with "our troops" and the private anger of the woman interviewed, real political issues seep through. Not least among them are the racist and economic discriminations that are behind the disproportionate number of black military personnel in the Gulf. The lack of heroism of this war, and the hypocrisy with which Bush exploits patriotic and moral feelings to camouflage his realpolitik war, also show between the cracks. "I just can't see it."

Significantly, this was the first military-wife interview on this national network after the official start of the war. In the first few hours of coverage reporters and newscasters were forced to ad-lib and pull stories together from a very scant amount of actual news. They didn't have their stories straight yet. Into this unaccustomed gap erupted stories, such as the one above, that contradicted the networks' narrative of patriotic support. It was only a matter of hours, however, before the stories took on the seamlessness that retrospectively characterizes the war news. Simultaneously, the news anchors were able to lapse into their accustomed transparency and to again be mere vehicles for the news. But some telling confrontations took place in that crucial gap.

Eichelberger's refusal to take part in the masochistic scenario points to some of the limits of a psychoanalytic approach, limits that Doane recognizes. Social and economic differences separate Eichelberger from the generic image of the (white) military martyr. Doane ties the scenario of masochistic identification with consumerism, and one can pursue

the connection to a notion of resistance. Just as that image can be bought (into), so can a consumer refuse to buy it, or be unable to afford it.

In a seeming paradox, the female spectator's inability to fetishize is caught up with her positioning as a consumer. Because female spectatorship collapses "the distance between subject and object, spectator and image,"¹⁰ the story goes, one achieves identity only through commodities, and through one's own commodification. This fluidity of identity is most useful in a political situation that requires of women chameleon transformations, as did the home front in the U.S. during World War II. "Overidentification," after all, is not only excessive closeness to the images on the screen but also identification with more than one position—women who identify too much. During World War II, Doane writes, commodities had a central place in the mesh of contradictions that moved women into the work force and, when men returned from military service needing jobs, back out, by painting the appeal of well-equipped domestic surroundings. The split subjectivity of the woman who was both Rosie the Riveter and lovely feminine wife found a parallel in the doubling of female types in advertising and films from the World War II era.

This appeal to a multiple female subject has, I believe, become normalized in contemporary advertising, as women are required to hold their own in the work force as well as maintain both sex appeal *and* domestic stability. Doubling, indeed multiplying, of female roles was equally evident in the television coverage of the Gulf war. Women are proffered constantly changing identities, and the relations among them constantly shift and quake. Now women are on both sides, protecting the right to be feminine (and own appliances) both by embodying it and by fighting for it.

The contradictions that comprise militarized femininity speak loud and clear in the war news's address to multiple female subjects, as well as in the first advertising during the war. Sometimes this doubling occurs schizophrenically in the same figure or type. The figure of a young servicewoman tearfully leaving her children behind and camouflaging her femininity in uniform, for example, was evoked repeatedly in the news leading up to the war. She is applauded for her toughness and patriotism, adored for her maternity, even made out to be a conventionally sexy figure. Her tears, however, show the strain of this multiple identification—and signify the punishment she faces for abandoning her first duty as mother. Female newscasters are also figures that manage contradictions—in this case, those of distanced authority and sisterly sympathy—while using these qualities to encourage a depoliticized support of the war. And of course, advertising

constructs women from many angles advantageous to the contradictory needs of a militarized society. It does not matter whether the ads that began to appear a few hours into the war coverage were booked months beforehand, since they merely distill the froth of patriotism, femininity, and guilt that is at work on us in wartime and peacetime.

The very first ad on WROC since the bombing began, at about 7 a.m. on January 17, follows a story on peace demonstrators and promotes Buick automobiles. "When it comes to fuel efficiency, our beautiful little Skylark beats Honda Accord. Our stylish Century tops Toyota Camry. Our sporty, dynamic Regal clobbers Honda and Nissan." In language appealing to the narcissism of women, who comprise the majority of car buyers in the U.S., this ad enlists them in the nationalistic war against the real enemy—Japan.

Other ads in the first hours of the war appeal to the (female) consumer-as-masochist, with heavy emphasis on mothers. These included ads for Progresso soup—a dad and two daughters get caught in the rain, mom makes hot soup, "Share the warmth: Progresso soup," cut to little girls wearing tutus; and Robitussin—competent mom ministers to sick family throughout the night. Both appeal to the same caring, stoic, self-sacrificing woman constructed by the interviews. Narcissistic identification is made minimally possible, but the real appeal here is to a masochistic selflessness—which is made to seem like the working mom's *modus operandi*. Other advertisements for drugs, using female protagonists, simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss pain. Shortly after the interview with the bravely coping Fort Bragg wives are ads for Anacin and Preparation H. Contradictions (such as those that confront the woman who rushes home from her low-paying job to doctor her kids and feed them canned soup) are reconfigured at the personal level as "stress": "When I get a stress headache, it's like I have a pounding on each side of my temples." Such ads also underscore women's dependent role in a hierarchical professional structure—"What a relief! The doctor said I don't need surgery for my hemorrhoids!", sighs a good-looking grey-haired woman. As in the military, women's pain is trivialized and contained, and they are urged to get a hold of themselves and recognize their place in a patriarchal organization.

Finally, among the first advertising of the war was a disturbingly appropriate ad for Heinz ketchup. Playing on Heinz's "anticipation" slogan, it shows, in soft focus, a pretty young woman in 1940s dress waiting listlessly (for the ketchup to come out of the bottle) at a kitchen table. The door bursts open—it is a man in uniform, her beau. She jumps up to embrace him. As they dance to the radio in the kitchen, dollops of ketchup gently fall on one, then the other hamburger. The

slogan is "As long as there's been slow dancing, there's been Heinz." The appeal to faithfulness, to the romance of the wait, and to the heroism of the soldier is abundantly clear—as though nothing had changed in 50 years.

This list of advertisements conveys a heterogeneity of subject that Doane's notion of doubling alone cannot sufficiently explain. Masochistic identification is certainly a powerful model for how the early television war coverage carved out a place for its female spectator. However, it is not "women" as a bloc who must be appealed to, but different women, differently; a variety of roles play in the construction of militarized femininity.

If subjectivity is constructed through particular historical circumstances, rather than merely absorbing a whiff of "culture" through psychoanalytic processes, we can account for the various significances of particular social forces, such as a U.S. war in 1991. The meanings of militarized femininity are necessarily different now from what they were in the 1940s, and different from one community to another, even when the signifiers are the same. Stuart Hall has suggested that cinepsychoanalysis places too much importance upon the moment of subject formation because it elides several processes by homology—"ideology is structured like a language," "the unconscious is structured like a language"—and then gives explanatory precedence to the psychoanalytic process, whereby the subject is constituted in the symbolic. To telescope those processes back out would allow for a historical understanding of subject formation, of which psychoanalytic processes would be a necessary but not sufficient part.

Hall carries out this unpacking with aplomb in "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists,"¹¹ an essay that attempts to trace the construction of the subject from the psychoanalytical to the political level. Following Foucault, he conceives of ideology as a somewhat free-floating discursive process, more of a "constellation" than a hierarchical chain of command, which intersects with other such constellations of power. This notion is useful to counterbalance Enloe's emphasis, implicit in *Does Khaki Become You?*, that the militarization of femininity fulfills the coercive demands of "military and civilian elites." We know it to be a more autonomous process. It is carried out, as Enloe herself points out, in such intimate relations as childrearing; and it works through the desires of subjects—hence the importance of television's constant play on those desires.

Power is diffuse; but to understand how a phenomenon as crudely political as war finds support in individual subjects, we must accept that power can play upon the desires of large groups of people. Hall

asks "how it happens that in all periods, there co-exist many systems and currents of philosophical thought and how these currents are born, how they are diffused, and why in the process of diffusion they fracture along certain lines and in certain directions."¹²

Political change is achieved through an appeal to different constituencies with different claims on their allegiance. Seemingly divergent interests could be united patriotically behind the U.S. in the Persian Gulf war through constantly reiterated and adjusted appeals to various subject positions: in other words, the war was marketed as shrewdly as any other product. Television, with its multiple address, is an ideal vehicle for exhorting a diverse audience—if not to a shared belief, then at least to a range of complementary and sometimes overlapping beliefs. For example, one sector of the war audience may be assured that the U.S. is the rightful monitor of world economic relations; another that God is on the side of the allied forces; another that one's hard-won right to own a big car and a motorboat is being defended; another that America kicks butt; another that whatever one thinks about the war, it is important to support the soldiers fighting it. This last selling point, with its soft-focus emotional appeal, dangled provocatively from a yellow ribbon.

The variety of ways in which TV news functions as narrative suggests how it is able, perhaps better than the cinema, to accommodate a shifting set of alliances and identifications. Because of such qualities as its less mimetic picture, its lack of a sense of author, and the constant interruption of its narrative, television is thought to break down the voyeuristic structure of primary identification.¹³ It has been described as a "feminized" medium by virtue of the distracted and fragmented viewing state it encourages. Closeness, a lack of differentiation from the world on the screen, makes the viewer's relationship to television similar to the "overidentification" that characterized a female spectator's gaze at the women's films of the '40s, in Doane's account. "Live" television, such as the news, challenges even further the notion of a distanced and voyeuristic viewer.¹⁴

The narrative impulses toward coherence are no less present in television news than in film. War, like other issues, gets contained and decontextualized, its particular struggles reduced to atomized "stories" with simple morals.¹⁵ As I noted earlier, the coverage of the Gulf war is like a buddy film—intensely male, offering phallic power and male bodies for viewer identification and pleasure. However, to the extent that the war coverage sets up a clear polarity of good and evil and restates sociopolitical conflicts in personal terms (as I discuss below), it is like a melodrama—a "women's" genre. "By employing conven-

tions taken from narrative TV melodrama (including a focus on the family—the news ‘family’ and the families investigated), news programs can achieve the emotional intensification and moral polarization associated with dramatic serials.”¹⁶ It is precisely in the decontextualizing, storytelling form of the news, with its appeal to viewers’ desire for identification, that female spectators are most powerfully addressed.

The hierarchy of television news anchors, from the network to the local level, convincingly mimics an extended family. At its apex sit the male network anchors. Their authority translates into conveying an air of detached objectivity, never betraying personal inclinations, while projecting a generalized sympathy. Their rhetorical style tends toward what Robert Stam characterizes as a “calculated ambiguity of expression” that “favors a kind of oracular understatement, cultivating ambiguity, triggering patent but deniable meanings, encouraging the most diverse groups, with contradictory ideologies and beliefs, to believe that the newscasters are not far from their own beliefs.”¹⁷

The serious and “objective” weight of the national news carries over into the intimacy of the local news, through the feeling of camaraderie that the local newscasters and reporters create. The sense of hierarchy is mitigated by visual cues: because of the curved arrangement of the newscasters’ desks and the way their looks to each other and then out to the viewer describe a shallow arc, the presentation of the news feels like an inclusive horseshoe, with (on the network I watched) Dan Rather in the center, the local newscasters seated toward the edge, and the ends extending to include me. Needless to say, in the process of creating this intimacy television news depoliticizes its contents. This occurs most thoroughly at the local level, where anecdotes about national issues take a more “personal” approach that empties them of political significance. The local news coverage is the emotional and reactive aspect of the news, the “wife” of the national news, facilitating acceptance of the stern and paternal edicts delivered by the networks.

At the local level, although all the local newscasters nurture the feeling of family by chatting, joking, and acting concerned, it is the female newscasters and reporters who more often cover “human interest” stories and who offer the most sympathetic clucks and interjections. A feminized version of calculated ambiguity makes them capable of relaying a variety of stories, even from conflicting viewpoints, with apparent sympathy. Like the female characters in conventional Hollywood film, they are most open to projection. Yet they continued to have positions of authority and are called upon to make firm, objective statements. Liz Fiore, one of the newscasters at WROC

took this nurturant role even further at the outset of the war. Her eyes frequently welling with tears, at one point she even tenderly touches the hand of a woman interviewee with family in the Gulf (touching is very rare) before switching back “into character” as objective conveyor of information. This volatility of identity recalls the doubling Doane points out in wartime films, as well as the contradictions Enloe sees in the lives of militarized women.

In addition to basking in the reflected authority of the national anchors, the local newscasters’ direct address to the audience makes them appear to see out, to have unmediated access to us. This power indicates an important distinction among figures of women on the news, which distinguishes female newscasters and reporters from the specularized female characters of film and of conventional narratives. All are objects of the gaze and of identification, but the female newscasters and reporters mediate identification as well as offering it. Thus they are occasionally in the position of framing other women in a way that makes them appear to be victims.

The role of female news presenters in creating a sense of family and flattening political differences, as well as their hybrid position of power and sympathy, are clear in the first local station break on the evening the war began, January 16, on Rochester’s WROC-TV. The 11:00 news opens with a story on soldiers’ families who met that day at the Harbor Beach Club, a local bar. There families of enlisted people in the Gulf, mainly their wives, girlfriends, and mothers, had gathered for a supportive social evening sponsored by the bar, only to hear the news on television that the war had started. Reporter Robin DeWind interviews some of these people “sharing a common fear,” as she puts it, asking, “Are you afraid?” “Definitely,” one woman replies; “It’s like your stomach coming up in your throat,” another tells her. Their names and relation to the troops (“mother of serviceman”, etc.) are shown on the screen. DeWind mediates our masochistic identification with these women: she milks the emotional moment for all she can, asking people for blow-by-blow descriptions of their feelings when the news came out that their loved ones were now in danger.

This and the next couple of local stories efficiently collapse political issues into “feminine,” personal ones. Commenting on a peace demonstration downtown simultaneous with the meeting of military families, WROC co-anchor Jerry Vega says, “I expect in the days ahead perhaps there will be more [protests],” and co-anchor Liz Fiore responds, “I would think it would be very comforting, because [of] the feeling of shock, and very often you’re alone in your home or apartment and you just want to be around some people.” Their dialogue deftly

conflates political passion with the desire for family connectedness, as though to say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, only that we are all together."

Later when we return to the demonstration, where the protestors shown are largely African American and many are women, reporter DeWind dismisses it as a "quiet protest. There's a feeling of unity among [the protestors]; most of them are very upset. Most feel this war is morally wrong. Now they've gathered here with candles and they've been singing spirituals, and just having this feeling has helped them get through." She does not note the predominance of black protestors, let alone connect it to the prevalence of low-income black men and women in the military. But her reference to spirituals underscores the contradictions between these facts and the image she attempts to draw of a quiet, unified protest.

DeWind interviews a female reservist, a drill sergeant, who is articulate in her opposition to the war, criticizing the ethic of "might makes right" and attacking the fence-sitters who refuse to come out in opposition to the war. This woman could carry the weight of an oppositional voice, as a member of the military and a "real woman" (she is also carrying a baby in her arms). But the reporter's packaging neutralizes her protest, as it does the African Americans'. "As the word went out, more and more people felt this was what little they could do to pray for peace" — *not* to protest the war, despite the clearly stated intentions of her interviewee.

We turn back to the local anchor, who reminds us that if *we* are "looking for a place to gather" we can go to the protest site *or* to a downtown church. Protest is lumped with the military families' gathering at the bar and now with prayer. "We all need some kind of comfort," Fiore sighs, noting that Reverend Billy Graham is spending that night at the White House to pray with President Bush. The message becomes, "We all have to get together in order to pull through," as though all Americans, from the president who declared the war to the activists who oppose it, are united around some amorphous common comfort. Thus, even if their subjects *are* just looking to be with other people on this frightening night, merely in seeking refuge they are also uniting behind President Bush. The presentation conflates gathering with family, family with military, and (not a small jump) military with nation: all are bound together with the yellow ribbon of emotive patriotism.

In fact, the sense of commonality is probably greater for those watching the news presenters make connections among all these disparate groups than it is for participants at the individual gatherings at the bar, the peace demonstration, or the churches. The family feeling

emanates from the newscasters, especially female newscasters. Thus the most available form of identification at work in this short interlude of local news is the appeal to feel a "feminized," emotional connection with the big events of national news coverage. If not specifically masochistic, the identification is family-like in the feminine sense, which means putting others' feelings first, suffering on behalf of others, and indefinitely postponing their own pleasurable abandon to grief, despair, or anger.

Back on CBS, another female news figure works to level political differences and create a feeling of togetherness on a national level. Connie Chung, known for presenting barometers of national opinion (during such events as elections), comes aboard to present the CBS/*New York Times* poll and give her impression of the country's response to the war. "Most Americans were still jolted by the news," she begins—note the "still," as though acceptance should have already begun to take hold, although this is only several hours into the official start of the war. Over a shot of the news ticker in Times Square, Chung continues, "We've been receiving good news and bad news from the Times Square ticker for generations," and reviews the statistics about who supports and who opposes the war. Protest, Chung tells us, is "typical, this is something we expected." Also "typical" is the fact that fewer women than men favored the war: "It's happened in past wars in which the women support military action to a lesser degree." Chung seems to suggest that even opposition to the war, by women and by peace demonstrators, is part of the natural course of any war, like teething. Her news ticker reference also suggests that war, like that other event we associate with Times Square, New Year's Eve, is a cyclical, predictable thing. This language, together with slightly pro-military and anti-activist gestures—"this war effort," the "unruliness" of the peace demonstrators—not only normalizes but subtly encourages support for the war. Chung's soothing and confident manner marshals support in a way that, for many viewers, the militaristic graphics and khaki-clad talking heads cannot.

It is interesting to note, in this first lengthy coverage of the reactions of military wives on this network, how Dan Rather falls over himself to coax military families—and by extension all women watching the coverage—that they are part of a national community mediated by television. "I know you've been talking to a lot of these families," he begins. "Do they understand, do they know how personally and directly we all want to communicate with them our solidarity with them in this hour of concern and fear—however one may feel about the policy, what the president is doing—it's war and we understand. Is there a feeling that they understand that?" Reaves gives him less re-

assurance than he might: "There's an 'I'll believe it when I see it' attitude among these women." Only with difficulty does he mediate the resistance of Eichelberger, and of both African American and women viewers, to the framework of compassionate community into which Rather tries to assimilate her.

Rather's earnestness seems to contradict the posture of calculated ambiguity that encourages identification from a range of positions. It is as though he is taking advantage of his privileged position as the voice of CBS to exhort the feeling of community that ordinary methods aren't producing. His unusually warm interjection may also reflect nervousness about the image of his profession: since the media were accused of causing our defeat in the Vietnam War through negative reporting, he wants to establish from the beginning of this war that he intends (America) to win. But Rather's "we" also stands for the entire United States, for the family CBS is invested in maintaining. He not only enforces a notion of commonality but implicates himself in this community of suffering. Rather must take on masochism for the bad wife, Linda Eichelberger, who refuses to do so.

The efforts of a handful of Dan Rathers and of the Liz Fiores around the country appear to have taken effect by the very next day, January 17. Connie Chung returns with new CBS/NYT poll results: the percentage of Americans who support the war has jumped dramatically to 73%. Most tellingly, not only do more people appear to be in favor of the war, but they seem to have forsworn cynicism and embraced a deliberately foggy feeling of national unity. Americans no longer think the main reason for the war is to protect the supply of oil to the United States, Chung reports. That reason has dropped to third place, behind the more noble justifications of stopping Hussein and freeing Kuwait. But, Chung says (ad-libbing rather awkwardly), "When it comes to whether or not they support it, they say it doesn't matter what the reason is [that we are engaged in this war]. . . . It's apparently not clear to Americans precisely the reason, but the rally around the President's way of thinking occurs right now, and that is that they support it." It would seem that the news's efforts to rally support for the war by creating a feeling of family that clouds political issues have worked like a charm.

Ironically, Chung also notes that people polled say they receive most of their information from television. She implicates her own medium by demonstrating that a *disinformed* public is more likely to take the patriotic route. Solidarity depends upon not criticizing but going with the groove, sharing the feeling of the whole country as family. The use of female newscasters and of portrayals that encourage masochistic

identification is integral to this feeling, which empties political content from the news to replace it with affect.

In reflecting on this war I can't get away from the yellow ribbons—literally, as they still hang in shreds from front porches over a year after the war's end. The most affective, sentimental symbol of the war, the ribbons were also the most tenacious. Similarly, the most affective coverage of the war, the coverage that suppressed analysis in favor of a vague feeling of family, most powerfully rallied Americans around the war. Both carried the message to "support our troops," with its ring of nurturance, faithfulness, family feeling, and complicity in the militarization of the country. Women had to be sold on the war, and it was women—their images as objects of the news, their roles as presenters of the news, and the position the news encouraged them to occupy—who played a key role in selling it.

Yet the example of Dan Rather shows that the masochistic identification is, ultimately, open to all: male and female spectators are encouraged to gag themselves with the yellow ribbon of sentiment. One way to avoid the passivity that characterizes the viewer of our media war is to identify with the means of violence and the heroism. But this sort of look was difficult to sustain in the absence of visible violence and a clearly delimited moral agenda. The "supportive" identification survived, as we saw when the flags came down and the ribbons stayed up.

Points of resistance—the Linda Eichelbergers of the war—did and do exist. When news figures strain to conflate different perspectives into a coherent story; when interview subjects refuse to get sucked into the narrative of the news; when anchors drop their calculated ambiguity: these betray some of the points at which oppositional readings are possible. The tension at these points shows how contrived was the news's representation of a national family, because the content of its stories—such as the dissent of war protestors, or the disproportionate use of African Americans to fight the war—negate that feeling of family. Since replacing content with affect was crucial to developing public consent, it comes as no surprise that the most powerful symbols of the war were precisely those that had the least to do with what the war was about, and very much to do with feminine roles of nurturance and self-sacrifice.

NOTES

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1. Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (London: Pluto Press, 1983) 212; emphasis in original.
2. Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," *Screen* vol. 26, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1983): 2-16. As it happens, those valiant bombing sorties and ground assaults were brief punctuations to long periods of helpless waiting, deprived of sight, in blacked-out bunkers. Indeed, the myth that military service is the fullest expression of masculinity endured some tests in the Gulf war, with its high-tech weaponry making some traditional military roles obsolete. In general military service forces people into extraordinarily passive roles, requiring that they give up individual agency, endure humiliations, and unthinkingly obey orders. However, the myth continues to be bound up with other myths of masculinity and patriotism.
3. Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address," in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1987) 80.
4. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 16.
5. Doane, "The 'Woman's Film'" 80.
6. Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 12.
7. Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 16.
8. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* 215.
9. Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* 47.
10. Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 29.
11. Stuart Hall, "The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism Among the Theorists," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 35-73.
12. Hall, "The Toad in the Garden" 55.
13. See Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Psychoanalysis, Film, and Television," in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 190-92.
14. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1983) 12-22. Feuer is referring to a discussion by Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow.
15. Mark Crispin Miller, "How Television Covers War," in *New Challenges*

for *Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988) 365-74.

16. Lynne Joyrich, "All That Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism and Consumer Culture," *Camera Obscura*, no. 16 (Jan. 1988): 133.
17. Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator," in Kaplan 29.