

# Mediated Humiliations: Spectacles of Power in Postmodern Culture

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Abstract of book project

(Prepared for the 2005 Workshop on Humiliation and Violent Conflict, 6th Annual Meeting of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies in New York, December 15-16, 2005)

Spectacles of humiliation have become all the rage in US popular cultural production and consumption: acts of humiliation are pervasive in media phenomena ranging from television programming, where it passes as a form of mass entertainment, to inter-group conflicts, where competing spectacles of humiliation confirm W.T. Mitchell's assertion that images are now "weapons of war" (21). Episodes of real people enduring humiliation have become a staple in talk shows, where episodes of humiliation have already motivated two retaliatory murders; TV news broadcasts, where videotaped images of humiliation fuel intercultural hostilities and function as powerful signifiers; and of course reality shows, where contestants set themselves up for public humiliation to earn celebrity status and cash awards. Given the US's transnational media clout, these trends have profound implications not just domestically but abroad as well.

My project theorizes the politics of humiliation as postmodern signifying practice, exploring its role in a variety of cultural narratives and representations. Focusing on the centrality of mass media in regulating and socializing groups within given contexts, my analysis examines these mediations as part of an acculturation process, arguing that spectacles of humiliation play a formative role in the articulation and enforcement of US cultural hierarchies and its supporting technologies. The work begins with a theoretical analysis of the concept of humiliation, noting its historical and etymological foundations and their relevance in shaping US cultural identity. I then turn to an exploration of humiliation's ideological role, especially as a gendered concept. I examine the ways that gender dichotomies give shape and substance to acts of humiliation—particularly when enacted for public display. The study looks at television as it mediates and constructs images of humiliation, integrating the notion of "witness," which structures the humiliation dynamic, into an analysis of spectatorship. I explore the consumption of news and entertainment—and news as entertainment—and include analysis of the phenomenon of "reality television," which is often referred to as "humiliation TV." Following the discussion of humiliation as television spectacle, the final chapter turns to the uses of humiliation in the "war on terror," noting how gender and narcissism implicitly shape media spectatorship.