

Framing the Perpetrators: Lee Miller's Photography of the Liberation of Dachau

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FIGURE 1. Lee Miller, Dead SS prison guard floating in canal, 30th April 1945. Courtesy Lee Miller Archive.

A body lies partially submerged, framed by fronds of grass to the left and a bright reflection to the right. The dappled sunlight reflecting off the water merges with the patterns of the camouflage uniform, telling the viewer that this is the body of a fallen soldier. The temporality of the image is seemingly suspended, floating, like the corpse itself. The image speaks of an action completed; the killing of the soldier, but the body appears held in a limbo between death and burial, in a temporal state of uncompleted action. The almost peaceful way the body floats just under the surface, and the way the water softens the shape of the body and head lend a gentler air to the image, obscuring the details of the death mask. A dichotomy therefore operates between the formal qualities of the image and what it depicts.

Journal of Perpetrator Research 2.2 (2019), 216–223
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.2.2.53 © 2019 by the Author



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In this photograph, there are multiple layers of slippage of form and content, the surface of the photograph having a strong aesthetic and formal structure, yet the subject is that of a corpse.

The image was made by the female American professional photographer Lee Miller,¹ who was working for *Vogue* magazine, soon after she arrived at the Dachau Camp on the 30th of April 1945.² Together with *Life* photographer David E. Scherman, she entered the concentration camp one day after its liberation, accompanying soldiers from the 42nd Rainbow Division who, together with the 45th Thunderbird Division, had been the first Allied troops to arrive at Dachau the day before.

As Sharon Sliwinski notes, the images made by Miller and others of the liberation of the Nazi camps 'both testify to events at the heart of civilisation's discontents and stubbornly remain at the limits of human understanding'.³ According to her son, Antony Penrose, Miller felt this sense of utter incomprehension of the scenes she encountered,

Speechless and numb, she could not accept at first the enormity of the carnage and wanton slaughter. Here, and earlier at Buchenwald, this reaction was shared by some of the G.I.s. Unprepared for the hideousness of political and racist crimes against civilians, they thought at first that the camp was a grotesque propaganda stunt faked by their own side.⁴

The photograph under consideration was taken in the canal that formed the outer fence of part of the camp, near to one of the watchtowers that guarded it, known as Tower B. The camp perimeter had been defended by a ring of Waffen SS, clad in the *Tarnjacke*, their characteristic camouflage uniform. However, the majority of the SS *Totenkopfverbände*, the actual camp guards, had fled the camp in the days before the arrival of the US forces, and the *Waffen*-SS men were new arrivals tasked with manning the watchtowers that overlooked the camp.⁵ According to the later US Army investigation into the incidents at Dachau, a group of

1 Lee Miller became Man Ray's assistant in Paris in 1929 and was part of a circle that included Pablo Picasso, Paul Éluard, and Jean Cocteau. For more details see Phillip Prodger and others, *Man Ray, Lee Miller: Partners in Surrealism* (London: Merrell, 2011).

2 For a fuller account of Lee Miller's experiences at both Buchenwald and Dachau see Sharon Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 83–110.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

4 Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985), p. 139.

5 On the day before the liberation of the main camp, the acting Commandant, Martin Gottfried Weiss, had given control of the interior of the camp to a group of prisoners called the International Committee of Dachau and had then left with most of the regular guards that night. According to Arthur Haulot, a member of the International Committee, German and Hungarian Waffen-SS soldiers were then brought to the camp in order to surrender the prisoners

Waffen-SS were occupying Tower B, and they surrendered to the US soldiers but were subsequently executed on the spot and their bodies thrown into the moat.⁶ The investigation determined that a significant number of SS in a range of locations had been executed by the American troops, under the command of Lt. Col. Felix Sparks⁷ and Lt. William P. Walsh. Miller described her vision of the scene, at that point evidently unaware of the exact circumstances of the death of the soldier,

There were dozens of SS lying around killed in the battle and by the uprising of prisoners themselves. The small canal bordering the camps was a floating mess of SS, in their spotted camouflage suits and nail studded boots... They slithered along in the current, along with a dead dog or two, and smashed rifles. Prisoners and soldiers tried to fish some of the bodies out.⁸

Indeed, Miller herself photographed other bodies of German soldiers at several locations as well as the image under discussion here, including ones that depict close range head wounds and the bodies of what appear to be invalids.

The square proportions of Miller's Rolliflex twin lens reflex camera give the image a formality and a solidity characteristic of the medium format. The soldier seems in a dreamy reverie, almost as if asleep, carrying resonances with the Pre-Raphaelite painting, Millais' *Ophelia*.⁹ In the

to the U.S. Army. These forces generally offered only token resistance to the Allied soldiers, as they had been ordered to formally surrender the camp to the advancing US forces.

- 6 Accounts of the total numbers of SS soldiers killed at Dachau vary from 12 to over 500. There are conflicting calculations of the exact number of German troops who were executed and conflicting reports of the exact sequence of events, and what triggered the shootings, but it is clear from an analysis of the visual evidence around these events that a significant number of men were killed, in multiple locations around the camp. The available photographs show also that some groups were wearing combat uniforms, whilst others were invalids, supporting the other material evidence from the liberation of the camp that suggests that many of the killed were *Waffen*-SS who had recently arrived at the camp or were wounded soldiers who were recuperating in the hospital rather than actual guards who had been working at the camp. Although most accounts of the events at Dachau mention the killings at Tower B, the coal yard and the boxcars, they do not detail the other locations around the camp that the photographic evidence demonstrates occurred. The wide range of locations, distributed around the area, does suggest that men from a company other than those under the direct command of Lt. Walsh carried out executions as well.
- 7 For an account of Sparks' experiences at Dachau and indeed during the whole war, see Alex Kershaw, *The Liberator* (London: Hutchinson, 2013), pp. 267–301.
- 8 Isabelle de le Court, 'Surrealist Aesthetic and the Concentrationary Sublime in Lee Miller's Photographs of Buchenwald and Dachau', in *Concentrationary Memories: The Politics of Representation 1945–1985*, ed. by Max Silverman and Griselda Pollock (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013) pp. 115–131 (p. 123).
- 9 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851–2, oil paint on canvas, 762 x 1118 mm, Tate Gallery.

symbolism underlying her photograph, Miller deployed some of the most compelling symbols in the human psyche – sleep, dreaming, and death. That Miller was well aware of the connotations of the scene with historical precedents in the realm of art is borne out by her conscious referencing of painting in her work from World War Two. In her diaries, she wrote of encountering a scene in a combat field hospital that she felt bore a striking resemblance to a religious scene, commenting that ‘[i]n the chiaroscuro of khaki and white I was reminded of Hieronymus Bosch’s painting “The Carrying of the Cross”’.¹⁰ Miller was also heavily influenced by more contemporary approaches to art, as Mark Haworth-Booth notes, her photographs ‘remind us of Lee’s first-hand knowledge of Surrealism, and the idea of “convulsive beauty” and its many images of effigies’.¹¹ Penrose also felt that this image was a conscious construction by Miller to create a complex set of readings, arguing that she ‘uses light, shadow and the properties of water to suggest that the guard’s death is justified, yet redemptive. The mysterious beauty of the image, which seems to dissolve the man’s features as he sinks beneath the surface, implies the larger issues – [of] responsibility, memory, grief’.¹²

The contrast between the aesthetic qualities of the image and the knowledge that the soldier was member of the *Waffen-SS* and all that entails creates a tension of representation. The further revelation that he was in all likelihood executed without trial and the body unceremoniously thrown into the canal adds yet more complexity to the responses of the viewer. The formal qualities of the image, and its content, are at odds with the knowledge gained from the caption and the context. Images that combine a traumatic event or evidence of it with another quality such as aesthetics or everydayness often lead to what can be viewed as a genre slippage, in which the expected tropes of meaning of the image are disturbed. This image therefore displays such a sense of genre slippage, a misfit between form and content, as the elegiac qualities of the aesthetics of representation of the fallen soldier are challenged by the nature of the unit of which he was a part and the circumstances surrounding his death. The extent to which these formal qualities of the image, controlled by a professional image-maker, contribute to its effect are demonstrated by a second image of the same body, made by one of the American soldiers also present. Whilst it retains something

10 *Lee Miller’s War*, ed. by Penrose (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), p. 17.

11 Mark Haworth-Booth, *The art of Lee Miller* (London: V & A Publications, 2007), p. 194.

12 Antony Penrose, *Roland Penrose and Lee Miller: The Surrealist and the Photographer* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2001), p. 132.

of the ghostly, otherworldly feel of Miller's photograph, the composition and framing do not convey the same complex range of readings.¹³

Miller also photographed the body being retrieved from the canal, as did an official US Army photographer. In this image, the event has become a spectacle, as a crowd of hundreds of survivors from the camp watch on as the corpse is recovered. The body of the executed soldier lies in a position reminiscent of a Renaissance or Baroque painting, as does the body language of the American soldiers and the drapery of their uniforms. This again references the visual heritage of the representation of suffering and draws on a catalogue of representational equivalences familiar to a Western audience.

Miller's careful framing of her subject reveals her ability to remain professional and creative in the face of extreme experiences, yet this very attitude is often challenged as unethical. Many critics appear to deny to photojournalism the aesthetic possibilities granted to other cultural forms and even other forms of photographic representation.¹⁴ Janina Struk, for example, maintains that the application of professional standards of technique is inappropriate to the depiction of such stark horrors as the concentration camps. Critiquing the work of Margaret Bourke White and Lee Miller from the camps of Buchenwald and Dachau, she writes that their photographs have a 'technical merit and an aesthetic quality which appear incongruous. The large format quality with flashlight added a drama that seems superfluous and not only filmic but painterly'.¹⁵ The implication of such concerns is that there is something inherently morally problematic, or in bad taste, to use the conventions of formal composition and technique in situations of distress. Photographers thus often seem to be caught between two conflicting sets of concerns, on the one hand critics like Rosler and Sekula

13 I have explored similar themes of the representation of perpetrators in the photography of the liberation of Bergen Belsen including a discussion of the arrest of the camp commandant, Josef Kramer, and the Höcker album in Paul Lowe, 'Picturing the Perpetrator', in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. by Geoffrey Batchen and others (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), pp. 189–200.

14 See, e.g. Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Rockford: Open Court, 2003); Mark Reinhard, Holly Edwards, and Erina Duganne, *Beautiful Suffering: Photography & the Traffic in Pain* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007); Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)', in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 151–206; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Robert Mapplethorpe, Ingrid Sischy, and Richard Howard, *Photographs* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1991).

15 Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 129.

who accuse photography of showing too much, and on the other critics like Sontag who accuse it of showing too little.¹⁶ But both sides of this argument miss a vital feature of photography; it is a fragmentary, partial view and can never hope to offer everything there is to know or feel.

Michael Rothberg's concept of 'traumatic realism' is particularly useful here as a way to reconnect the representation of atrocity and trauma to the often-banal context in which it occurs. Rothberg defines as traumatic realism a point where the 'extreme and the everyday are neither opposed, collapsed, nor transcended through a dialectical synthesis – instead, they are at once held together and kept forever apart in a mode of representation and historical cognition'.¹⁷ This concept thus has a powerful role: by returning the traumatic tear to the context of the social fabric, it can make the audience aware of the interconnections and inter-existences of the ordinary and the extreme. The viewer is therefore forced to confront a misalignment between elements of the operation of the image, perhaps between form and content, or form and caption. These unexpected slippages subvert the viewer's expectations of how to interpret a photograph and provide potential points from which the audience has to actively make sense of what is in front of them. They can thus provide a powerful mechanism for engagement and potentially greater understanding, as the viewer has to do significant interpretative work to understand the image, work that can lead to a greater feeling of involvement.

Like many images of trauma, Miller's photograph does not provide easy answers but rather poses questions about how to interpret photographs and how to use them to think with. These slippages of representation generate disturbances in the reading of the image that can potentially enhance the engagement of the viewer by inviting them to think more deeply about the meaning of the image. This disjunction is potentially one of the most powerful processes to facilitate a form of audience engagement with images that goes beyond passive reception. It creates a contradiction between form and content that potentially forces the viewer to think more deeply about the meaning of the image by creating a disturbance in the reading of the photograph. This dichotomy between what is seen on the surface of the image and what

16 See Allan Sekula, Allan, 'Dismantling Modernism: Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)', *The Massachusetts Review*, 19.4 (1978), 859–883; Rosler; Sontag, *On Photography*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

17 Rothberg, Michael, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 55.

is known about the image's context creates a space where the viewer has to do more work to make sense of what the photograph is, or does. The dissonance of the genre slippage shifts from a passive viewing of the image where every element in the construction of its meaning is in harmony and agreement, to one that demands more engagement from the audience in actively constructing the meaning in the photograph rather than passively receiving it.

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