***BELIEVE IT! Lee Miller’s Second World War Photographs as Modern Memorials***

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According to David Bathrick, ‘Visual representation of the Holocaust has proved to be an absolutely integral but also highly contested means by which to understand and remember the Nazi atrocities of the Second World War’ (Bathrick, Prager & Richardson, 2008: 1). For the war photographer, the real problem is not necessarily documenting the effects of human destruction and dealing with the ethical connotations that images of war inevitably provoke. The primary issue is having the ability to interpret the horror in both the photographic and conceptual sense of the word and, perhaps more importantly, having the insight to comprehend the short and long-term significance and value of the images and the subject matter that they divulge. American-born photographer and war correspondent Lee Miller approached the Second World War by applying her knowledge of creative photography and Surrealist methodologies and practices to capture the atrocities of war through an aesthetic eye. As a former *Vogue* model and apprentice / muse to the Dada-Surrealist artist and photographer Man Ray in Paris between 1929 and 1932, Kate McLoughlin believes that Miller’s artistic background and ‘professional experience brought to her understanding of visuality a depth greater than that found in work of other contemporary correspondents’ (2013: 336). Using the creative process of fragmentation, for example, Miller deconstructed the horrors of war—and the Holocaust, in particular—to enable the viewers of her photographs to absorb the horrors piece by piece as they attempted to comprehend what they were witnessing. Subsequently, this practice of artistic deconstruction enables the viewer, not only to see but also to *remember* the specific details rather than simply an overview of the war. In other words, war photographers like Miller have been able to use their medium and artistic skills to reconstruct the horrors of war as a form of ‘modern memorial’ for future generations by deconstructing, or fragmenting, history through interpretation.

*Modern Memorials*

In the aftermath of the First World War, there was a sense of urgency by the mourning public to remember and commemorate the war dead. However, as Jay Winter writes, ‘…the search for ‘meaning’ after the Somme and Verdun was hard enough; but after Auschwitz and Hiroshima that search became infinitely more difficult’ (1995: 228). Writers and theorists such as T.W. Adorno, Elie Wiesel, and Saul Friedlander, according to Carol Zemel, ‘warned against the aestheticising dimensions of Holocaust representation, its problematic proximity to visual pleasure, and its immortality in the face of atrocity’ (Zemel, 2003: 205). Miller’s relationship with Man Ray in Paris developed her understanding of Surrealism as outlined in the writings of André Breton and there is evidence throughout her photography that she was fully aware of Breton’s theory of ‘convulsive beauty’; his assertion that beauty can project both pleasure and pain simultaneously. Miller confirmed in her essay, ‘I Worked with Man Ray’, published in *Lilliput* in 1941, that Man Ray had taught her that beauty is present in every object and person and ‘that the artist’s job is to find the moment, the angle, or the surrounding that reveal that beauty’, regardless of how terrible the object or surroundings might be. Therefore, Miller’s war photographs support Paul Fussell’s idea of ‘modern memory’, which is derived from the influence of modernism in the interwar period. Winter explains, ‘[Modernism] describes the creation of a new language of truth-telling about war in poetry, prose, and the visual arts’ (1995: 2). Miller, as a Surrealist and a modernist, therefore, uses photographs to progress the idea of the memorial from being predominately ‘traditionalist’ to essentially ‘modernist’ through her Surrealism-inspired photographic representations of war.

Traditional memorials are generally encased in patriotism (and occasionally sentimentality) as objects created to preserve the memory and heroism of the war dead—a justistification to the population that the fallen did not die in vain. However, while Adorno contentiously declared that there could (or should) be no art or poetry after the Holocaust, Miller’s photographs, which are surrealism-inspired artefacts as well as historical documents, seem to remove all elements of over-romanticising and justification, instead preserving the facts: the actuality and consequences of war in its rawest form. Many traditional memorials record the names (where identified) of those killed in battle. One example is the First World War memorial in St John the Baptist Church, situated in the rural Cotswolds village of Great Rissington. The memorial, a tablet and pediment with black lettering beneath a carved sword and festoon, depicts the names of thirteen men from the village who died in the Great War. However, unlike most traditional war memorials, the names are accompanied by thirteen framed photographic portraits, therefore personalising the fallen with an image as well as a name. The text above the photographs reads ‘Forget Me Not’. According to The Burns Archive, this form of visual memorialisation was not uncommon before the Second World War and the concept of using memorial photographs had been part of the mourning process and a form of commemoration during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photographic images of the deceased were common features on gravestones across Europe, particularly in Jewish cemeteries, and had been used during the American Civil War of 1860-1865. Likewise, in Britain during this period, Victorian families would circulate memorial cards displaying photographs of dead relatives, for example, to mourn the premature death of a child. In contrast, the dead in Miller’s modern memorials are nameless, often without any means of identification, and killed not as a direct result of warfare but at the hands of tyrants. Cornelia Brink writes:

The photographs of the liberation [of the concentration camps] have long become part of Western countries’ collective visual memory. They mostly impress themselves on our sentiments and conjure up a threatening, mute and nameless sense of ‘once upon a time’. Then as now they set off strong emotional reactions, of shock and terror, of compassion as well as rejection (2000: 135).

In a letter to Audrey Withers shortly after her visit to Dachau, Miller described her own memories of the camp following its liberation and expressed anger and sympathy towards the treatment of prisoners:

I fell on my knee once and the pain of the tiny sharp stone on my kneecap was fierce; hundreds of Auslanders (foreigners) had fallen like that every day and night. If they could get up they could live, if they hadn’t the strength, they were left to be hauled off to an unidentified end, just another unknown soldier (Burke, 2005: 261).

Miller’s nameless dead are victims of a dictatorial regime and, as Winter points out, the traditional *monuments aux morts* recorded ‘the harsh history of life and death in wartime’ and ‘invite us to recall the more central facts of loss of life and bereavement’, just as Miller’s war photographs do (1995: 78). According to Janina Struk:

Like memory, photographs are ephemeral, subject to change according to whom the memory belongs. But unlike memory, a photograph is evidence that a moment in time did indeed exist. As people learn to interpret photographs, they can also learn to interpret memory. At Yad Vashem, survivors are tutored in ‘testimony classes’, trained in vocabulary and how best to bring order to their fragments of memory and the confusion of the past. Photographs, like memory, can reveal evidence of a moment-in-time but they can also conceal the story that lies outside the image (2005: 212).

It is at this point of concealment or vagueness that the imagination process ultimately takes over.

*Photographs as Evidence*

Miller had been working for *Vogue* magazine as a model and photographer since 1927 and despite the conflicting relationship between fashion and war photography, continued to work for the magazine throughout the war helping to temporarily transform the primarily fashion-orientated glossy into a magazine that kept its readers informed about wartime conditions. After being accredited to the United States Army as an official war photographer in December 1942, Miller’s aim, like most photojournalists, became to document the war as historical evidence. Yet, through her images she intended to provoke and occasionally shock *Vogue’s* readers, especially in the United States, into a stark realisation that such atrocities had, and were still, taking place across Europe. As General Dwight D. Eisenhower declared following his tours of the concentration camps in 1945, ‘Let the world see!’ (Zelizer, 1998: 86). Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004) describes the photographs of the camps as ‘a means of making “real” (or “more real”) matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore’ (2004: 6). In other words, the principle aim of these atrocity images was to inform the unaffected or sceptical of the realities of war. Barbie Zelizer further explains that, ‘Through its dual function as carrier of truth-value and symbol, photography thus helped the world bear witness by providing a context for events at the same time as it displayed them’ (1998: 86). Therefore, Miller’s photographs of the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau provide an eyewitness account of the consequences of the Nazi atrocities and, as visual records, act as insightful reminders of human capability.

On 8 May 1945, the date that marked the official end of the war in Europe, Miller sent a telegram to the British *Vogue* editor Audrey Withers in which she demanded, ‘I IMPLORE YOU TO BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE!’ A few weeks earlier, in his 15 April 1945 CBS radio broadcast from inside the Buchenwald camp, Miller’s friend and ally Edward R. Murrow also pleaded with his American listeners: ‘I pray you to believe what I have said about Buchenwald. I have reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words’. Murrow ended his report, ‘If I have offended you by this rather mild account of Buchenwald, I'm not in the least sorry....’ Prior to the liberation of the first concentration camps in Eastern Europe during the summer of 1944, the general opinion of the western world towards any allegations made against the Nazis was that the reports had to be propagandist lies. However, in January 1944, Hungarian-born British journalist and writer Arthur Koestler attempted to express his frustration in supressing these beliefs in his essay ‘On Disbelieving Atrocities’, originally published in *The New York Times* in January 1944 and later published in a three-part collection of essays titled *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945). Koestler writes:

There are few of us, escaped victims or eyewitnesses of the things which happen in the thicket and who, haunted by our memories, go on screaming on the wireless, yelling at you in newspapers and in public meetings, theatres and cinemas. Now and then we succeed in reaching your ear for a minute…We, the screamers, have been at it for about ten years (Zelizer, 1998: 41-42).

Koestler refers to the atrocities that Jews, in particular, suffered at the hands of the Nazis as ‘the greatest mass-killing in recorded history’ and describes how a series of photographs present on his desk while he writes ‘accounts for my emotion and bitterness. People died to smuggle them [photographs] out of Poland; they thought it was worthwhile’ (1945: 88-92). The British journalist Richard Dimbleby, who broadcasted from the Bergen-Belsen camp, echoed Murrow’s tone by declaring, ‘I must tell the exact truth, every detail of it, even if people don’t believe me, even if they feel they should not be told’ (Dimbleby, 1975: 193). However, the scenes were so implausible that reporters and broadcasters, like Murrow, Koestler and Dimbleby, had found it difficult to articulate what they had seen into words and consequently turned to photographers, like Miller, to translate their written horrors into a visual language. As Jack Price wrote in the American trade journal *Editor and Publisher*, the public, ‘long subjected to floods of propaganda, no longer believe the written word. Only factual photographs will be accepted’ (Zelizer, 1998: 86). In his essay ‘War Journalism in English’ (2009) Leo Mellor discusses how the world’s press had attempted to describe the horrific scenes they had witnessed through in-depth narrative detail while, in many instances, experiencing difficulties such as the physical problems of reporting from a battlefield, exposing themselves to violence, and encountering strict censorship. Mellor writes, ‘These reports not only refute the historic tropes of war, courage, and descriptive excess; they also offer a starting point for a literary question that has proved central since 1945: what language might be adequate to engage with the Holocaust?’ (Mellor, 2009: 78).

War photographs, as with most photojournalism, usually require captions to explain the contents and context of an image and, certainly in Miller’s case, are usually accompanied by associated written correspondence. However, sometimes the subject is so explicit that a lengthy narrative, or even a caption, is simply not necessary. In another telegram sent to Withers in April 1945, Miller declares, ‘I usually don’t take pictures of horrors. But don’t think that every town and every area isn’t rich with them. I hope *Vogue* will feel that it can publish these pictures’ (Haworth-Booth, 2007: 188). American *Vogue* did decide to publish a selection of Miller’s photographs, along with the extract from her telegram and very little additional text, in a photo-essay for the June 1945 edition of the magazine with the headline in a large, bold font: ‘BELIEVE IT’. British *Vogue*, however, chose to publish only one of Miller’s photographs from the death camps and in a June 1945 photo-essay titled ‘Scales of Justice’ instead focused optimistically on the victory of war rather than the consequences. The photograph of Miller’s selected for publication depicted a statue of Justice brandishing scales and a sword next to Frankfurt cathedral, an image which, according to *Vogue*, conveyed, ‘the Christian and cultural heritage which the Nazis aimed to destroy. Now they are themselves destroyed. But statue and spire remain, symbols of justice and peace’ (Burke, 2005: 265). When questioned some years later about her decision to omit the concentration camp photographs, Withers explained, ‘The mood then was jubilation. It seemed unsuitable to focus on horrors’ (Burke, 2015: 265). That ‘unsuitability’ would inevitably be replaced with a sense of necessity in the aftermath of the Second World War in order to reflect on the war through photographic representation.

*Deconstructing Horror*

Miller’s images of the Holocaust may appear to some as being in stark contrast to her photographs taken at the beginning of her photographic career—the Surrealism-inspired artworks, the *Vogue* fashion shoots and the studio portraiture of artist friends, society figures and celebrities—that, along with her war portfolio, make up her artistic oeuvre. From a critical perspective, one might question the ability of a photographer with such a background to comprehend and reflect on the sights she witnessed at Buchenwald and Dachau. Others may argue that having worked as a muse for some of the twentieth-century’s greatest artists in what was essentially a male-orientated, one might say misogynist, artistic circle, Miller had gained invaluable experience for her later role as a female war photographer. Certainly, Antony Penrose believes that her role within Surrealism had equipped her with the perfect foundation for photographing the horrors of war. As Penrose explains:

Lee’s Surrealist eye was always present. Unexpectedly, among the reportage, the mud, the bullets, we find photographs where the unreality of war assumes an almost lyrical beauty. On reflection I realise that the only meaningful training of a war correspondent is to first be a Surrealist – then nothing in life is too unusual (1998: 19).

Linda Nochlin adds, ‘the human body is not just the object of desire, but the site of suffering, pain and death’, which perhaps further explains how the close relationship between pain and desire, as reflected in the work of the Surrealists, provided Miller with the correct mind-set to photograph war (Haworth-Booth, 2007: 88-89).

Unlike many of her peers, such as Margaret Bourke-White who tended to take a photograph and then quickly depart from the war scene, Miller preferred to spend time carefully working on her photographic composition and form, often taking strikingly perceptive photographs from positions that were difficult and challenging both physically and psychologically. Miller demonstrates her artistic approach to photographing the war in an image taken at Dachau titled ‘US Soldiers Examine a Rail Truck Load of Dead Prisoners, Dachau, Germany, 1945’. To compose the shot, Miller positioned herself inside the compartment of a cattle train filled with corpses to create a perspective that forces the viewer to adopt a stance next to one of the victims. Outside the train, two medics stand arms crossed constructing a psychological protective barrier between themselves and the appalling vision before them—predominantly, a glassy-eyed, open-mouthed corpse. As Jean Gallagher writes, ‘It is a picture not only of a Holocaust victim but of American observers’ looking and disbelieving. It represents being caught as an observer within the frame of proximity to incomprehensible damage and at the same time straining against that frame, attempting to insert distance between seer and seen’ (1998: 86). Amongst the thousands of images taken of the Dachau ‘death train’, Miller’s is the only photograph to construct an individual, horrific viewpoint from within and, subsequently, takes her interpretation beyond the scope of understanding both artistically and psychologically. Sharon Sliwinski describes Miller’s courageous actions as crossing ‘what seems like an impossible boundary, entering into the monstrous, unimaginable space, this gruesome community of the dead. As spectators of this image, we too are imaginatively brought into railcar-cum-coffin’ (2010: 392). This photograph contrasts with a second photo taken from outside the same train with two GIs framing the horrors within. These two images show two different perspectives of the same scene, the first photo arguably the more evocative due to Miller’s position within the train providing the viewpoint of the victim within in contrast to that of the bystander without. As Lorraine Sim comments, ‘Miller’s war photography seeks to dialectically engage the viewer through its often narrative qualities, unusual viewing positions and, at times, manipulation of the gaze’ (2009: 48).

Similarly, in ‘Dead Prisoners, Buchenwald, Germany, 1945’, Miller constructs a feeling of entrapment by using fragmentation to create an abstract expressionist form; filling the frame with the random, merging shapes of body parts to ensure that the viewer absorbs the entire scene through the confrontation of detail. The viewer’s gaze is first drawn to a distorted blood-smeared face in the centre of the frame. By focusing on that face and registering the features, the corpse is instantaneously transformed into a human being among the anonymous, faceless dead. This reading is even more poignant if we consider that, according to Penrose, Miller would consciously search among the faces of the dead hoping to find her Parisian friends who had been captured by the Nazis (Penrose, 2007). The viewer’s eye is, in turn, forced to navigate around that central face to focus attention on the surrounding body parts and hanging skeletal limbs. Miller effectively captures just one fragment of a much larger atrocity by using carefully organised composition to allow, and often manipulate, the viewer’s gaze—forcing an interpretation aligned with what the photographer or even the prisoners would have seen. There are no complete bodies in view in this photograph, just fragments of bodies that only suggest the true extent of the horror. As John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), ‘Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting the sight from an infinity of other possible sights’ (1972: 10). Miller uses her Rolleiflex camera, to guide the viewer’s gaze into and around the scene so that they can absorb every minute detail in extreme close-up as Miller herself had experienced it. It could be argued that as part of this artistic process Miller was also combining a need to inform with a propensity to shock or to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. As Gallagher describes this methodology:

The photographs are close-up, clearly focused images with virtually no spaces between the figures of the bodies and the frame. The corpses occupy completely the field of vision, leaving no space of escape or relief for the viewer’s line of sight, eliminating distance from what must have evoked (and certainly still does evoke) reflexes of revulsion, of looking away, of disbelief, and a desire to distance (1998: 87).

This description of a scene that ‘must have evoked…reflexes of revulsion’ can be applied to Julia Kristeva’s writings on the abject. However, in contrast to Kristeva’s theory, Sontag believes that when confronted with images of death and destruction the natural human response is not to look away from the scene but to *look at* the scene, which aligns with Breton’s theory of convulsive beauty. Curiosity draws our attention to the horrible or the taboo. As Sontag explains, ‘It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked’ (2004: 36). There is a sense of shame or guilt in looking at a dead body as much as a sense of shock or curiosity, which raises ethical debate about the role of the atrocity photograph in addition to its importance as an historical record and visual memorial to the war dead.

In Miller’s *Vogue* photo-essay ‘“Believe It” - Lee Miller Cables from Germany’, published in June 1945, photographs of healthy, well-fed children and idyllic, orderly villages are juxtaposed with images of furnaces and charred remains at Buchenwald (1945: 103-105). In a photograph titled ‘Released Prisoners in Striped Prison Dress Beside a Heap of Bones from Bodies Buried in the Crematorium, Buchenwald, Germany, 1945’, Miller has composed the scene diagonally into two halves to symbolise the thin line between life and death. The bottom left half of the image contains the charred bones while the top right half reveals the legs of five camp survivors, three still wearing the distinctive striped prison uniform, observing the sight before them. Although the heads of the prisoners were included on the original negative, in Miller’s final cropped photograph only the men’s legs and bottom half of their torsos are present within the frame—an omission which alters the meaning of the photograph and permits the viewer to imagine the reflective expressions on the men’s faces. As for the viewers of these war photographs today, imagination must inevitably replace knowledge when viewing some scenes of war; only those who were there at the time and bearing witness to the event could possibly have produced anything close to an accurate representation of the scene. The viewer is never able to observe the full picture, only one individual’s representation or interpretation of it, therefore, Berger’s theory of ‘absence versus presence’ might be applied to Miller’s ‘released prisoners’ image. For example, Miller has purposefully removed an important part of the scene through her use of composition and cropping allowing the viewer to *imagine* the emotions and expressions within the image. Therefore, what is absent from the scene is just as important as what is present within it. As Berger writes in *Selected Essays and Articles:* *The Look of Things* (1972), ‘A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it’ (1972: 181). In other words, to imagine is to reconstruct a version of reality. However, to remember is to reconstruct an historical or personal (or both) memory.

Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida* (1981) that the camera is a mechanism for documenting evidence. However, although this is partly true it is not the camera’s sole purpose. John Tagg refers to Barthes’ belief in this photographic realism by writing, ‘Beyond any encoding of the photograph, there is an existential connection between “the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens” and the photographic image: “every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent”. What the photograph asserts is the overwhelming truth that “the thing has been there’: this was a reality which once existed, though it is ‘a reality one can no longer touch”’, unless, of course, the scene has been staged or manipulated (Tagg, 1993: 1). Miller does use her photographs to document a fragment of history which once occurred but no longer exists, but as many of her war photographs illustrate, documentation and art often merge to produce images that are both aesthetic and horrific and where an element of the reality has been manipulated or removed. Therefore, while in some respects photography can be viewed, according to Barthes, as ‘a direct and “natural” cast of reality’ more so than in painting, this belief is debateable (Tagg, 1993: 1993). Sontag writes, ‘A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show. That is why photographs, unlike handmade images, can count as evidence’ (2004: 42). However, by analysing Miller’s war photographs we can establish that while it is true that some photographs, particularly war images, can be classed as ‘straight’ documentary photography by providing the evidence that certain events occurred, some war photographs can both show and evoke through an element of manipulation by the photographer.

Berger in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing* writes, ‘We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach—though not necessarily within arm’s reach’ (1972: 8). Miller’s photographs, in their function as surreal documentation, often omit an element of the reality and the result is a conscious process of audience participation that allows the viewer to use their mind’s eye to fill in the gaps. In some cases, Miller’s use of omission acts as a defensive shield for the viewer, safeguarding them from the authentic full-scale horror of war. Of course, photographs cannot capture all aspects of the war scene—the smells, the sounds, for example—and perhaps some of the more disturbing sights that Miller would have inevitably experienced were intentionally left undocumented. After all, the viewer is only able to *see* what has been captured by the photographer within the photograph and therefore can only *imagine* what is absent or being consciously omitted by the photographer; viewers remain ignorant of, or must use their imaginations to establish, what horrors lie beyond the frame. While what Berger says is essentially true, that it is the viewer’s choice whether to look at a photograph or not, it is also the photographer’s choice to decide what the viewer can see within that photograph and what should be left to the imagination or open to individual interpretation. In other words, a photographer, like a painter or writer, has the power to manipulate, to restrict and to direct the viewer’s gaze, thus emphasising that an element of artistic control is involved. As Walter Lippmann stated in 1922, ‘Photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us, without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable…The whole process of observing, describing, repeating, and then imagining has been accomplished’ (1922: 92). The process of remembering should also be added to that list. However, omission and manipulation have always been common factors within photography, even within the genres of war and documentary photography, and as Sontag writes, ‘Photographs tend to transform, whatever their subject; and as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life’ (2004: 68). Therefore, by incorporating the Surrealist practice of fragmentation it could be argued that Miller is using a selective vision and is therefore being sympathetic towards, even *protective* of, the viewers of her photographs by providing them with smaller insights rather than subjecting them to the full impact of the complete picture, if this result is indeed possible.

*Conclusion*

Ulrich Baer has written about the role of Holocaust photographs after the Second World War exploring whether ‘the “ontotheological” concerns’ raised by theorists like Adorno, ‘will diminish and finally disappear with the passing of the last survivors and witnesses’. Baer writes:

Even when part of laudable efforts to document and commemorate, these once shocking and now ubiquitous images may lead today to the ‘disappearance of memory in the act of commemoration’. They represent the past as fully retrievable (as simply a matter of searching the archive), instead of situating us vis-à-vis the intangible presence of absence, which Jacques Derrida has called the ‘hell in our memory’ (2005: 69-70).

Today, it could be argued that the emotional reactions once generated by scenes of war have now been replaced by a sense of disinterest from overexposure via television and video footage. The more images of war we see, the more *normal* war appears to the extent that the viewer is less easily shocked. As Leon Wieseltier noted in his article ‘After Memory’ published in the *New Republic* in 1993, ‘In the contemplation of the death camps, we must be strangers; if we are not strangers, if the names of the killers and the places of the killing and the numbers of the killed fall easily from our tongues, then we are not remembering to remember, but remembering to forget’ (1993: 20). Writing in 1972, during the last years of the Vietnam War, the first ‘televised war’, Berger argues that the idea of the viewing public becoming immune to images of war was a somewhat cynical justification (1991: 42). However, more than thirty years and several conflicts later, this ‘transparent cynicism’ as Berger calls it, is not quite as transparent. The viewer is so commonly confronted with images of war that televised scenes of destruction inevitably have a lesser effect on the human psyche. John Taylor describes this concept as ‘compassion fatigue’ (1998: 19). Sontag adds that, due to this reaction, still photographs, as well as moving images, lose the ‘emotional charge’ with ‘the possible exception of those horrors, like the Nazi death camps, that have gained the status of ethical reference points’ (1979: 21). In other words, the initial amazement and disbelief a viewer once experienced when being presented with war photographs has been replaced by an instantaneous curiosity, intrigue or sadness. As with television itself, news footage of another suicide bombing in the Middle East has increasingly become background noise in many households, and the popularity of the *virtual* reality of violent computer games only increases our immunity towards the *actual* reality of war and death. Sontag writes:

The sense of taboo which makes us indignant and sorrowful is not so much sturdier than the sense of taboo that regulates the definition of what is obscene. And both have been sorely tried in recent years. The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary—making it appear familiar, remote…inevitable’ (1979:19-20).

Perhaps this idea of increased immunity or the undermining of response is not, however, applied to all war images, but only those war photographs or newsreels that do not directly affect us—as individuals, as a nation or even as a continent. Certainly, the closer we are to conflict or terror attacks the more affected we become.

If it is true that over the years we have developed a lack of interest in or sensitivity towards images of war, perhaps this change in attitude brings into question the effectiveness and role of war photographs as modern memorials for future generations. Marianne Hirsch has written extensively about ‘postmemory’, a term she uses to describe how future generations, the ‘generation after’, connect to past events. Hirsch claims that photographs, like memories, fade over time and that ‘the changes images go through mirror the movement from memory to postmemory’ (Hirsch, 2012: 37). Therefore, with time, like a visual Chinese whisper, the significance of an image changes, meaning alters and truth becomes misrepresented. In other words, the reality is lost to imagination, or continuous reinterpretation, again recalling Berger’s ‘absence versus presence’ theory. However, photographic memories can never replace those photographic images inside the heads of the witnesses and victims of the Holocaust; those unmoveable, undeletable images that stay in the mind for a lifetime. Nonetheless, it is essential for future generations that these images are reviewed and transformed from an individual interpretation into something more long-standing although this reconstruction of historical memory is not a straightforward process. Sontag suggests that photographs act as frozen moments in time, or in other words, visual representations of those moments—suspended snapshots, fragments—and it is those suspended representations that we recall when we think of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Although it is true that there is a danger that photographs might eclipse the event themselves in the remembering process, through Miller’s photographs we are given partial access to a scene to witness what it may have been like without having been subjected to the atrocities first hand. While Brad Prager, Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, have discussed the ‘problem of realism and representation’ (2003: 3), and others, such as Berel Lang, have questioned the idea of ‘Holocaust art’ with ‘its provocative consequences for the relations between form and content, the aesthetic and the ethical, the particular (or historical) and the universal (that is, the aesthetic *or* the ethical)’ (Hornstein & Jacobowitz, 2003: 23). I would argue that Miller’s concentration camps photographs, as examples of ‘surreal-documentary’, incorporate Surrealist practices, like fragmentation, to justify the artistic relationship between documentation and artistic methodology. Although Miller’s photographic style often reflects Bretonian Surrealism by amalgamating, or ‘convulsing’, horror and beauty, her photographs also demonstrate how images of war, and the Holocaust, in particular, dominate the historical record where verbal communication fails, thus ascertaining that the visual image is arguably more significant in the memory process than the written word. As Miller herself said in an interview on *The Ona Munson Show* in 1946, ‘I hope no one will forget the subject of these photographs, because I won’t’ (Lee Miller Archives).

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All images discussed in this essay are digitally accessible via the Lee Miller Archives website at <http://www.leemiller.co.uk>.