Western University

From the Selected Works of Sharon Sliwinski

2010

Visual Testimony: Lee Miller's Dachau

Sharon Sliwinski

journal of visual culture

Visual Testimony: Lee Miller's Dachau

Sharon Sliwinski

Abstract

This essay examines images of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp taken by American war correspondent and photographer Lee Miller. Miller's work is mobilized as an optic through which to grasp the shock of confronting the Nazi camps. Her images are read as a form of visual testimony. That is, although they fail to provide a transparent view of what occurred in the Nazi lagers, they are nevertheless inscribed with all that the photographer *did not know* of the events to which she bore witness. The nature of this strange unintelligibility is what the author pursues: the visual inscription of the unspeakable as a disquieting resource for thinking through the paradoxes of witnessing and the transmission of human experience.

Keywords

Dachau • Holocaust • Lee Miller • photography • visual testimony • witnessing

Before the idea of the Holocaust entered public imagination, spectators found themselves gazing upon its image. Allied publics came face-to-face with the Nazis' mass manufacture of corpses throughout the spring and summer of 1945. Photographs of the newly liberated concentration camps were widely reproduced in newspapers and illustrated magazines such as *Life* and *Picture Post*. Eyewitness reports crackled on all the major radio programs. Grim newsreels peopled with shockingly emaciated figures preceded evening screenings at the cinemas. Photographic exhibitions were quickly assembled in both Britain and the United States and tens of thousands attended. Such images, scholars claim, became 'the main event' of the time in the journalistic record of the West (Zelizer, 1998: 13). Yet despite this extraordinary proliferation, the

pictures did not produce an immediate understanding of what had occurred in the Nazi camps. Indeed what these photographs engendered was something more akin to a paradox: the public bore witness in 1945, but they did not know what they saw. Contemporary spectators perhaps do not yet know.

The words 'Jews' or 'Jewish' rarely appeared in the initial captions. Edward R. Murrow did not mention either of these terms in his famous radio broadcast about Buchenwald. General Eisenhower, who insisted that American and British delegations of government officials, newspaper editors, and legislators should actually take tours of this camp, referred to the 'German camps for political prisoners in which conditions of indescribable horror prevail' (cited in Hackett, 1995: 11). In one of the most vitriolic reports, appearing in of all places *Vogue* magazine, Lee Miller (1945a) wrote of 'the French, the Belgians, the Russians, the Poles, the British, the Americans, and twenty-two more countries who contributed their most innocent or their most cynical, their most talented, recalcitrant and unlucky to the long chord of bodies' (p. 42). The denomination did not go entirely unmentioned. Near the end of another report on Dachau, Miller mentions a Viennese woman, Dr Ella Lingens, 'who was imprisoned two and a half years ago for having helped hide Jewesses' (Miller, 1945b: 3). The *Saturday Evening Post* described the program of 'extermination for all those who dared to oppose the Nazi regime ... [or] had the misfortune to be born Jews' (Hibbs, 1945: 84). In more detailed reports it was sometimes pointed out that Jews faced the worst persecution, but more often the stories simply mentioned them as *among* the victims of the Nazis.¹

As Peter Novick argues in *The Holocaust in American Life*, such descriptions do not merely represent a failure of perception. Nor can they be fully explained as a delay in understanding the dark designs of Hitler's plans. Since the time of its official pronouncement at the Wannsee Conference on 20 January 1942, the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' was deliberately opaque. Near the end of the war, this deliberate obfuscation included targeting the remaining Jews in the camps, so by the time American and British troops entered the Western camps in April 1945, the majority of the surviving prisoners were not, in fact, Jewish.² The massive death camps in the East, which were composed almost entirely of Jews, had either been closed by the time the Allies arrived, or, as in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, were liberated by the Soviets with few American or British reporters present.³ All this points to the fact that, while contemporary spectators almost inevitably regard the emaciated figures in Lee Miller's or Margaret Bourke-White's now iconic photographs from Buchenwald and Dachau as images of Jews, this is not what most readers of *Life* and *Vogue* saw in 1945.

Despite the profusion of photographs, it took several decades for the idea of the Holocaust to find expression in public discourse. Hannah Arendt – herself an émigré from Hitler's Germany – first heard of the 'fabrication of corpses' in 1943, but she admits it took her another year and a half to believe these reports – only once she 'had the proof' (2000: 13–14).⁴ Her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which provides a systematic thinking through of the political, legal, and ethical abyss opened by the Nazis, was published in 1951. By the late 1950s, the publication of several testimonies including, *The Diary of Anne Frank*,

Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, and Elie Wisel's *La Nuit*, further galvanized discussion about the nature of the Nazi's program of murder. But it was not until the 1960s that the actual term Holocaust began to be widely used in public discourse. One of the most potent catalysts for this etymological shift was the Israeli trial of Nazi transport minister Adolph Eichmann. The body of international journalists covering the trial quickly learned that Holocaust was the word that Israelis had been using to translate the Hebrew term *Sboab* into English (the usage dates from the establishment of the Israeli State: a reference to the 'Nazi *sboab*' in the preamble of the 1948 Declaration of Independence appears, in official English translation, as the 'Nazi holocaust'). The daily news reports about the trial, widely printed in Western countries throughout the later half of 1961, brought into public circulation the idea of the Holocaust as something distinct from the war, that is, the coordinated plan to annihilate European Jewry.⁵

One cannot occupy an anterior position in relation to this 'difficult knowledge'.⁶ Yet perplexing questions remain about the time and manner in which understanding is made. How could the Nazi camps be widely photographed, indeed widely *seen* in 1945, yet the significance of these sites and the crime that they embodied take several decades to enter into widespread public discourse and thought? Does it make sense to claim that the first testimony of this catastrophe was pictorial if this visual evidence – this witnessing of the Nazi camps *in camera* – failed to furnish something one could call understanding? Certainly each medium brings its own set of properties to the material it seeks to transmit, yet in his work with oral testimony, Lawrence Langer (1991) suggests the breakdown in understanding occurs *between* the words and the events they seek to animate, *between* the medium of representation and the truth it attempts to convey (p. 42). How can this nuanced insight be brought to visual forms of Holocaust testimony?

In an effort to consider these questions, this essay turns to the images and reports about the Nazi concentration camps made by American war correspondent and photographer Lee Miller. From the time of D-Day, Miller journeyed with the Allied Front as it slowly moved into German territory. Together with several Divisions of the American Infantry, she entered Buchenwald and then Dachau concentration camps in April 1945. Her pictures and textual reports appeared in both the British and American editions of *Vogue* magazine throughout the war and its immediate aftermath. At the time of their initial circulation, Miller's photographs functioned as eyewitness evidence for a populace submerged in collective doubt.⁷ 'BELIEVE IT' headlined her article on the Nazi camps that appeared in the special 'Victory' issue published in June 1945. But in the decades since the war these photographs have taken on a radically new role: as icons of Nazi barbarism. Along with a handful of other photojournalists, Miller's images have come to belong to a well-known and widely reproduced group of images (most of which were made by the liberating forces) that serve to symbolize the Holocaust in its entirety. In the field of scholarship that interrogates such photographs and their uses, the consensus has been that these images do not help produce understanding but rather open a kind of ethical abyss. As one scholar puts it: 'Such photographs do not always bring the viewer to look, to

really see, nor can they be counted on to create emphatic bonds between the contemporary subject and the person from the unimaginable past' (Liss, 1998: xii). This critical position is perhaps epitomized by the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann for whom there can be no understanding of the Final Solution. In his view, striving towards intelligibility – the very project of understanding – itself constitutes an obscenity. In his 9½-hour film, *Shoah*, Lanzmann famously refused to include any historical photographs. This omission, he argued, was the only way to represent what is, in fact, unimaginable. For the filmmaker, as for many of his supporters, historical photographs are 'images without imagination'. Such pictures can only function as veil and shield, inciting a false sense of knowledge, all the while protecting the spectator from the true horror (Lanzmann, 1995).⁸

Such photographs, one might say, both testify to events at the heart of civilization's discontents and stubbornly remain at the limits of human understanding. This essay takes this antinomy as its starting point. Miller's images and words provide an optic through which to grasp the shock of confronting the camps. Instead of regarding the work as mere reportage, here the photographer's pictures are read as testimony to an encounter with occurrences that exploded the very grounds of understanding. This is not to suggest that Miller provides a transparent view or totalizing account of what occurred in these Nazi lagers. Rather her work is read for ways it is inscribed with all that she *did not know* of the events to which she nevertheless bore witness. As Shoshana Felman (1994) has shown, testimony does not offer a complete statement but rather addresses the impact of events that cannot be fully assimilated into cognition, events which exceed the available frames of reference (p. 5). With her Rolleiflex twin lens camera, Miller framed occurrences that could not be understood at the time of their unfolding, occurrences for which there were not yet words. To thus testify – not simply to witness but to attest, to *bear* witness – Miller took on the responsibility of transmitting these unintelligible occurrences to the public. Something that was not yet understood had to be represented. The particular nature of this unintelligibility is the visual evidence this essay pursues. If the photographs can be said to expose what Hannah Arendt (1994) called 'the image of hell', this is not because the Final Solution can be transparently rendered. To be precise, Miller's photographs *bear the mark* of this horror. And as spectators regarding them in the time of afterwards, our task is to interpret this mark as a disquieting resource for thinking through the paradoxes of witnessing in the age of the camera.

The Theatre of War

Lee Miller arrived in London in the summer of 1939 to join her lover Roland Penrose. At the time, Londoners had passed from uneasiness into impatient acceptance: the war of nerves had become a 'war of yawns' as the city awaited Hitler's *Blitzkrieg*. As an American, Miller was prevented from joining the local women's auxiliary force, but she eventually found work at the British offices of *Vogue* magazine (affectionately known as 'Brogue'). As a former *Vogue* model, her early assignments largely consisted of commercial fashion shoots, although Miller's eye was firmly fixed on the war front. In one of her first assignments,

she posed a model wearing a leopard-trimmed suit in front of the map of Europe and beside an array of helmets, boots and satchels. Miller's biographer, Carolyn Burke (2005), reads the image as a sign of the photographer's impatience to trade civilian garb for military gear.

The German night raids on London began in September 1940 and lasted until May 1941. In the beginning, some 200 Axis bombers attacked the city every night until mid-November. But for Miller, an ambivalent Surrealist who spent the late 1920s experimenting with photography in Montparnasse, this intimate acquaintance with the 'laws of blast' was not so much frightening as liberating (Burke, 2005: 205). The Blitz proved to be a powerful stimulant to her work. Simply passing through the city offered endlessly surreal views: huge barrage balloons dotting the sky, whole blocks of buildings regularly blown up into irregular shapes, churches spewing mountains of rubble from their pulpits, and underground subway stations doubling as dormitories. After the evening raids, Miller photographed the most arresting sights. A collection of these pictures were compiled and published by Ernestine Carter in her book called *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*. Designed as a complement to Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts, the book was a deliberate propaganda effort aimed at shifting American sentiment toward intervention. Brimming with Miller's surrealist tonality, it is surely one of the strangest entries in the history of war propaganda.

By D-Day, Miller had secured accreditation as a US war correspondent and six weeks later was aboard an Allied aircraft heading for the Army field hospitals in Normandy. On her first trip into northern France, Miller took 35 rolls of film and composed nearly 10,000 words on the tent hospital and front-line casualty stations. Her report begins:

As we flew into sight of France I swallowed hard on what were trying to be tears and remembered a movie actress kissing a handful of earth. My self-conscious analysis was forgotten in greedily studying the soft, gray-skied panorama of nearly a thousand square miles of France – of freed France. (Miller, 1944: 35)

This understandably mawkish opening quickly gives way to a gritty description of the 44th Evacuation Hospital. The article presents a stark portrait of the drama occurring in this strange, makeshift stage – the emphatic, precise gestures of surgeons and nurses working at a tireless pace to correct the gruesome wounds inflicted by war. Becky Conekin (2006) notes that, in contrast to the vast majority of journalistic coverage of the Second World War, which was committed to depicting soldiers' heroism, Miller's articles overflow with rich descriptions and sensual impressions – smells, sounds, and especially sights – frequently anchored by reference to the history of art. *Vogue's* editors were astounded by the photographer's report. They ran the full story, titled 'Unarmed Warriors', with 14 pictures in the August 1944 issue. Audrey Withers, the magazine's chief editor, described the effect of Miller's contribution as 'the most exciting journalistic experience of my war. We were the last people one could have conceived having

this type of article, it seemed so incongruous in our pages of glossy fashion' (cited in Penrose, 1985: 118). The essay secured the photojournalist's work a prominent place in the pages of *Vogue* for the next year and a half.

Instead of heading home after covering the Normandy hospital, Miller 'thumbed a ride' to the siege of St Malo where she got her first taste of the 'nerve-jangling' nature of modern warfare: the constant shelling and intermittent artillery bursts that made her 'jump a bit each time' (Miller, 1992a[1944]: 33). More than 60 years later, it is almost impossible to conceive of the difficulty of a woman correspondent getting close to the front during the Second World War, let alone finding herself in the midst of combat. Miller achieved this by taking advantage of erroneous reports that St Malo had already been taken. Instead of filing a report on how Civil Affairs moved in after hostilities, she found herself in the middle of a bitter street-by-street fight that culminated in a siege on the town's venerable citadel. She sheepishly cabled to her editor: 'I guess I'm the only dame who's really covered a battle' (Miller, 1992b[1944]: 65). And now that she had her 'taste for gunpowder' there was no turning back. From St Malo, Miller traveled to Paris. Miller set up a semi-permanent home in room 412 of Hôtel Scribe, which the Allied high command had requisitioned for press headquarters. She used this base as a sojourn from her repeated trips deeper and deeper into the European front. Her reports and pictures ran monthly in *Vogue* throughout the fall and winter of 1944-5. But despite the training provided by the brutal pattern of liberation, Miller could not have been prepared for what was to come.

Testimony *Visualis*

A few weeks after witnessing the horrors of Buchenwald, Miller, together with *Life* photographer David Scherman, entered Dachau concentration camp on the morning of 30 April 1945, one day after its liberation.⁹ Located in a suburb of Munich, Dachau was the first regular concentration camp established by the Nazis when they came to power in 1933. It was here that political opponents of the new regime were first imprisoned and here that the terror system of the concentration camps was developed. By 1937, Dachau was expanded into a large-scale labour camp, and from the autumn of 1944 when the territory controlled by the National Socialists began to shrink, it was to here that inmates of other camps were evacuated. In January 1945, the transports were filled with prisoners from Auschwitz. Between February and April, thousands of prisoners arrived at Dachau, most of whom were totally exhausted from having been marched or jammed into railcars for days or weeks. At the time of liberation, some 67,000 prisoners were registered in the camp's legers. Dachau remained in operation for the entire duration of the Third Reich. This oldest concentration camp survived longer than almost all the others. On 28 April 1945, one day before its liberation, the last transport of prisoners arrived at Dachau's gates. The train was made up of some 39 boxcars. It extended well past the borders of the camp in full view of the suburban villas that ringed its perimeter. The train's cargo consisted of approximately 3000 prisoners who had been evacuated by the Nazis from Buchenwald on or about 7 April. As Allied troops approached the camp on the

afternoon of 29 April, the train was their first discovery. When they opened the 'quarantined' boxcars, corpses tumbled out onto the gravel below. Each car was filled with bodies impossibly tangled in rags, blood and excrement. Of the thousands packed onto the train, fewer than 20 still drew breath. There were signs of cannibalism. Beyond these horrific scenes, the terrible, cloying stench is often what remains uppermost in the memories of those who took part in the liberation.¹⁰

Miller was travelling with a squad of the 42nd Rainbow Division who, together with the 45th Thunderbird Division, were the first Allied troops to arrive at Dachau. According to Miller's son, Anthony Penrose, the photographer's initial reaction to the camp was one of total disbelief:

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. (Penrose, 1985: 139)

Several reports suggest many of the American soldiers, despite belonging to battle-hardened units, simply broke out in tears or vomited uncontrollably at the sight (Berben, 1975; Dann, 1998).

There exist any number of photographs of what became known as the Dachau Death Train. In its online catalogue (which represents only a small sampling of the larger collection), the United States Holocaust Museum includes no fewer than 50 images of this train and its human cargo. During the first days after liberation, the camp was explicitly left untouched so it could be viewed and documented by groups of visitors, including an assemblage of newspaper reporters, editors and government delegations from the United States and Britain. Countless photographers – both professional and amateur – made images of the very same scenes. Miller herself (1945b) reports that:

soldiers were encouraged to 'sight see' around the place, they are abetted to photograph it and to tell the folks back home. However, by mid-day, only the press and medics were allowed in the buildings, as so many really tough guys had become sick, it was interfering with duties. (p. 4)

Miller focused her camera both on the terrible tangle of corpses inside the train, as well as the solitary, fragile bodies that lay on the tracks below. In one particularly forceful image she captures two GIs leaning in to examine the contents of one of the boxcars (Figure 1). The picture makes evident the overwhelming nature of the perception of the train. It offers a pictorial account of the liberators' encounter with this horror which is both scopophilic and traumatic. Two soldiers stand at either edge of an open railcar door, gaping at the contents of the container. Visible between them are a tangle of corpses, including one man who appears to be seated at the edge of the doorway. His

frame is tipped gently to one side as if in repose. Heavy, muck-caked boots hang unevenly out of the railcar door. Upon close inspection it is uncannily difficult to tell if these legs actually belong to this man. Their ungainly weight suggests he expired in the midst of an exhausting effort to climb out of this prison. The posture of the two GIs suggests that, although they have approached this terrible scene eyes first, so to speak, they do not take in what is immediately in front of them. They peer into the inky darkness, which, for the spectator of this photograph remains frustratingly opaque, like the latent content of a nightmare.

Figure 1 US soldiers examine a rail truck loaded with dead prisoners. Dachau. 30 April 1945. © Lee Miller Archives, England.

The scene depicted in Miller's photograph is perhaps paradigmatic of what would now be called 'traumatic experience'. In recent decades, a variety of fields have addressed the psychological phenomenon of trauma. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially titled the condition Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In a psychoanalytic framework, Cathy Caruth (1996)

characterizes traumatic experience as expressive of a certain paradox: 'that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness' (pp. 91-2). In these terms, trauma cannot be defined as a single event. Even though one of its principal symptoms is disturbing mental images that resist verbalization, its effects are not locatable or bound by a specific encounter. Caruth's elaboration of the paradoxes of trauma draws from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In that venerable text, Freud defines 'traumatic neurosis' as distinctly marked by a repetition compulsion. That is, the experience of trauma returns and repeats in the time afterwards, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against their very will. Memory of the inaugural event may be inaccessible to the subject, yet precisely what could not be grasped at the time of its occurrence is carried out belatedly in the survivor's actions and language. In Caruth's interpretation, the paradox of traumatic sight reveals an ethical relation at the heart of subjectivity. In this definition of the human condition, a subject is not in full possession of his or her experiences or knowledge, but rather is profoundly marked by a scarring relation to the real, by a wound that is not registered at the time of its occurrence. For Caruth, however, this wound speaks. Trauma has a voice that cries out; it is an address. In this respect, Caruth reads traumatic experience not just as a story of the individual in relation to events of his or her own past, but as a story of 'the way one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to an encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound' (p. 8). Trauma, in this formulation, is transmitted and received as a form of testimony that circulates both unbidden and ungrasped between subjects. It is often a fractured, doubled experience, an oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life provoked by the inextricable pain of surviving the witnessing of death.

Because trauma is so profoundly tied to the problem of address and the crisis of representation, its effects can be discerned and felt in the visual field.¹¹ This is to say, the force of trauma can be traced through a variety of visual symptoms. In the vast body of photographs made during the liberation of Dachau, for instance, one can glimpse recurring figures and tropes, uncanny signs of trauma's compulsive quality, its terrible possession of those who lived through these experiences. To cite one astonishing example, the man with the heavy, muck-caked boots who sits at the centre of Miller's photograph re-appears as the focus of an extraordinary number of images made by a variety of photographers, both amateur and professional (Figures 2 to 4). One image taken by a GI shows a crowd of his fellow soldiers, patiently waiting their turn for a glimpse inside this boxcar. Some images show soldiers looking at this figure. Some show the GIs looking at the camera with haggard expressions. Eric Schwab, a French photographer who travelled with the journalist Meyer Levin, pictured this same corpse in an extreme close-up. Considering this remarkable miscellany, contemporary spectators are left to wonder what about this particular individual – among the thousands who were on this train – proved to be so fascinating, compelled so many to stop and look, provoked so many pictures.

From the distance provided by the photographic frame, one can perhaps regard this individual as emblematic of the way the Nazis systematically rendered human beings into inhuman things. The corpse's posture and positioning mark him both as a man and as a being who has been deprived of the rights belonging to this category, a state of existence the Nazis called *Figuren*. In her initial response to the reports from the camps, Hannah Arendt (1994) termed this deprivation 'the image of hell':

They all died together, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; not as people, not as men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, not as good and bad, beautiful and ugly – but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body or soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal. (p. 198)

Arendt's terrible vision of what the Final Solution put into motion – the reduction of human life to mere matter – is perhaps not a perception that one can take in directly. The writer's words are derived from reflective contemplation made some distance from Dachau's gates. As the liberators' immediate response to the Death Train suggests, the direct sight of human subjects stripped of their humanity – people treated as mere matter, things that had neither body nor soul – was not something that could be held in mind, or indeed, digested. Put differently, the figure's repeated presence in the visual record seems to signal a perception of that which is paradoxically constituted by its lack of integration into consciousness. The material registration of this figure – his graphic presence in so many photographs – appears to be connected, in traumatic terms, precisely with the way this perception *escaped* full consciousness at the time of its occurrence. Contemporary neurobiologists have suggested that the 'etching into the brain' of a traumatic perception may be associated with its elision in normal memory (Van der Kolk, 1994; Van der Kolk et al., 1996). The experience is stored elsewhere, in bodily memory, which is largely inaccessible to conscious recall and relatively impervious to change. To translate this into visual terms, perhaps this figure was persistently photographed, indeed, pictorially 'engraved' into the visual record precisely because this represented a perception that could not be understood at the time of its occurrence. Indeed, as Ulirich Baer (2005) has elaborated, there may be a shared structural relationship between traumatic perception and the photograph. The *Figuren's* presence haunts the visible world like a traumatic flashback, a perception that literally has no place, neither in the past, which could not be fully taken in or experienced by the witnesses, nor in the present, in which this figure's presence cannot be fully deciphered. Put simply, these photographs bear witness to something to which it is impossible to witness.

All the more unimaginable, in this context, is that after taking a picture of this seated figure, Lee Miller actually dared to climb into the Death Train. The very next photograph on her film is a shot taken from *inside* one of the railcars

Figure 2 American soldiers view the bodies in one of the open railcars of the Dachau death train, 3 May 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Ruth Sherman.

Figure 3 Colonel Alexander Zabin. Corpses lie in an open railcar of the Dachau death train, May 1945. Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Figure 4 An American soldier poses next to one of the open railcars of the Dachau death train. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of J. Hardman.

(Figure 5). This is not one of the images *Vogue* chose to publish that spring. One can perhaps understand why. To remain with this photograph for any length of time is to risk experiencing a tear in one's imaginary capacity. In the foreground, a man's body lies face up on the dirty floor. His features – the glassy eyes and yawning black pool of a mouth – are unmistakably marked by death. A small object lies next to the man's ear, distracting the spectator's gaze. Framed by the open boxcar door, two soldiers stare at the corpse with both fascination and disgust. Their arms are crossed protectively over their chests, a gesture which amplifies the painful inadequacy of the medic's symbol on their helmets.

It is difficult to describe precisely what this image brings into view, the nature of what it transmits to the spectator. If Dachau were only a play, a grotesque propaganda stunt as the liberators first imagined, one might say this photograph breaks the 'fourth wall'. It takes us behind the scenes to show us the scaffolding of the stage. But of course this is no play. Miller crosses 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 this railcar-cum-coffin. From inside the train, we observe the living peering across this last frontier without recognition. Miller's picture shows what language can never say. It is a devastating revelation of that which can never be put into words. The photograph's fragile arrangement of figures in space simply imposes itself on us. It offers to our gaze an opening toward the inside and the

Figure 5 US soldiers examine a rail truck loaded with dead prisoners. Lee Miller. Dachau. April 1945. © Lee Miller Archives.

depths of the invisible, arousing our own fascination and anxiety about what we cannot and do not want to know about death, and especially this death, this brutal extinction which one hesitates to even call 'death'.

Vexingly, the next five photographs that Miller took are missing from the archive.¹² It is not clear whether these pictures, sent by military airmail to *Vogue's* British offices, were deliberately censored by the government or whether they were simply lost in the intervening years. But after entering the train and exposing a single frame, there is a cut in the pictorial record, a blind spot in the visual field. Following this unsettling absence in Miller's corpus, the record resumes with three shots of three different corpses lying next to the train, each in agonizing solitude. It is unlikely that, after having climbed into this horror, the photographer only took one picture from inside its maw, but evidence for this speculation has been excised from the record. Perhaps here is

another sign of the paradoxes of traumatic sight. There are literally thousands of photographs of the Dachau train, but all are taken from outside its borders. With the exception of Miller's single image, the view from *inside* this world remains out of sight and, indeed, beyond the scope of understanding.

What is at stake in attending the testimony these images offer is not, of course, merely an issue of verifying the material form of a past reality. The copious photographs of the same crumpled corpse should not simply lead us to question how images can supplement the historical evidence offered by other kinds of documents. Nor is it a matter of establishing how such images can reveal 'pictorial distortions' that are evidence of past viewpoints, as Peter Burke (2001: 30) has proposed. An interpretation of the testimony of the image must do more than aim to accurately describe social reality or a collective sensibility of a past period. Indeed, like its verbal counterpart, visual testimony is less about verifying material evidence as about registering the *impact* of experience. While bare facts may appear to be the only true thing – a train from Buchenwald arrived on 28 April 1945 containing almost 3000 corpses – this information does not help us come closer to the nature of the experience of this phenomenon, the *impact* of this monstrous encounter. Bare facts, or what Primo Levi (1989) once called 'vague pieces of information', fail to convey the significance of the encounter with the camps (p. 11). Indeed, the public rejected the first news about the Nazi lagers because the enormity of what the reports signified could not be accepted without destroying the prevailing worldview. Testimony, in contrast, is a form of address that seeks to transmit the force of this experience that has shattered the existing frames of reference.

For the living subjects recorded in these photographs, the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary seems to have collapsed. The sheer unbelievability of such scenes (evidenced not only by the soldiers' ceaseless gaping into the rail cars, but also by the way the liberators thought the camp was a propaganda stunt at first) suggests Dachau was encountered on a plane of equal unreality, or of 'unreal reality', Melanie Klein (1975: 221) might have said. The camp was filled with nameless dreads; things for which there was not yet language. At the time of liberation, what these camps signified literally could not be articulated in words. As Ed Murrow (1945) famously stated after visiting Buchenwald: 'I have reported what I saw and heard, but only part of it. For most of it I have no words.' Yet precisely where words lacked, pictures abounded. Indeed, with regards to the liberation of Dachau, as with several of the Nazi camps, one could say the ubiquitous use of photography presupposed the function of speech. At the very place where ordinary speech failed, photography was called upon to transmit the unimaginability of what was witnessed. The photographs (together with the act of photographing) provided a kind of mooring, anchoring the mental construction of the camp's 'unreal reality'. In psychoanalytic terms, the pictures can perhaps be thought to serve as emblems of a latent property of thought that Daniel Stern (1992) calls the 'pre-narrative envelope'. That is, the images worked as carriers for experiences that could not be voiced at the time. Before there were words, before there could be fully formed ideas about what the camps signified (in the sense of *eidos*), photographs held open the *possibility*

of imagining this unimaginable place, the *possibility* of finding words for these nameless dreads. The pictures provided testimony for what was unspeakable. They offered communication without understanding.

To aid the reception of her pictures, Lee Miller did attempt to verbally articulate what she witnessed. Before sending her story and film to *Vogue*, she cabled to the London offices:

I don't take pictures of these things usually as I know you wont use them, DON'T THINK FOR THAT REASON THAT EVERY TOWN AND EVERY AREA ISN'T RICH WITH THEM. EVERY COMMUNITY has its big concentration camps, some like this for torture and extermination ... well I wont write about it now ... just read the daily press and believe every word of it. I would be very proud of Vogue if they would run a picture of some of the ghastriness ... I would like Vogue to be on record as believing. (Miller, nd, 3-4)

Judging from the ellipses and the sentences that trail off mid-thought, Miller, too, had trouble finding words for what she was witnessing. But the US version of the magazine granted her plea, publishing part of her accompanying report punctuated by sets of juxtaposed images: 'German children, well-fed, healthy' next to 'burned bones of starved prisoners'; 'orderly villages, patterned, quiet' opposite 'orderly furnaces to burn bodies'. This page layout was followed by more pictures from the camps: a pile of corpses stacked like cordwood, a (mis)labeled image of a former guard hanged on an iron hook, two SS guards begging for mercy on their knees, a close-up of a Leipzig burgomaster's pretty daughter who committed suicide with her family. The British edition of the magazine ran a longer version of the article but only published a single photograph: a roughly stacked pile of corpses from Buchenwald.

Lee Miller's work for *Vogue* is but a single example of a vast network of photographers who sought to picture the conditions of the Western camps at the time of liberation. Throughout May and June 1945, Allied publics were exposed to an explicit and ongoing photographic spectacle that attempted to present visible evidence of the Nazi atrocities. Pictures abounded in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Picture Magazine (PM)*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Illustrated London News*, and *Daily Mail* among dozens of other publications. As Barbie Zelizer (1998) argues, this circulation of images played a distinct role in legitimizing photography as the pre-eminent tool for bearing witness to distant horror.¹³ During this period, pictorial evidence came to outweigh all other forms of testimony. It did not seem to matter that the images sometimes went without proper captions or were presented out of context to the times and places in which they had been taken. Indeed as Zelizer suggests, the more horrific the image, the less the photograph's specific details seemed to matter. In many cases, the images were so devoid of identifiable details, it was difficult to anchor them in a given time or geographic place. Yet the broader the horror the photographs could invoke, the more vociferous the public judgement. As the editors of the *News Chronicle* characteristically claimed at

the time, such photographs provide 'indisputable proof of Germany's crimes against the human race' (Zelizer, 1998: 96).

Such judgements could be read retroactively as a clarion call of the need for study of the visual dimensions of testimony. More than just a verbal form of communicating historical experience, such images show that testimony also operates prior or perhaps adjacent to speech. Indeed, it is to the very limits of language that such testimony compels us. As Georges Didi-Huberman (2008) has proposed:

We must do with the image what we already do more easily with ... language. For in each testimonial production, in each act of memory, language and image are absolutely bound to one another, never ceasing to exchange their reciprocal lacunae. (p. 26)

Pictures appear to dominate the historical record precisely where words fail. More study is needed to reveal the ways such images are tied up with the act of bearing witness, the nature of the responsibility of transmitting what is yet unknown to the public realm, and the subsequent understanding and misunderstanding these visual testimonies provoke in the domain of cultural memory.¹⁴

Notes

1. In a rare exception, the official report of the British Parliamentary delegation (who visited Buchenwald on 21 April 1945) points out that the inmates 'should not be confused with military prisoners of war'. The report goes on to claim the inmates fell into 'three main categories: (a) political internees and Jews from Germany itself; (b) as the Third Reich expanded, political internees and Jews from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, etc.; (c) from 1940 onwards, men and youths imported for forced labour from the various occupied countries' (*The Daily Mail*, 1945: 7).
2. According to several reports, in Buchenwald and Dachau – the two Nazi laggers from which the great majority of the Allied news reports spring – Jews only accounted for one fifth of the prisoners at the time of liberation. On 4 April 1945, all Jewish prisoners in Buchenwald were ordered to report for 'roll call'. Although the order was met with mass resistance, on 6 April more than 3000 Jews were forced to march from Buchenwald on foot. After the liberation, a count of the camp's population showed 20,000 prisoners, 4000 of whom were Jewish (see Hackett, 1995: 3–8). Similarly, just prior to the liberation of Dachau, camp records registered 22,100 of the 67,665 prisoners as Jewish. But beginning on 26 April 1945, just days before the Allies arrived, the Germans forced more than 7000 prisoners, mostly Jews, on a death march to Tegernsee (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Dachau', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*).
3. Janina Struk (2004) has argued that the early written accounts and images of the Soviet liberation of Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau, the two biggest and most notorious camps in Poland, were generally regarded in the West as Soviet propaganda and largely ignored. Struk also notes the importance of photographic production *during* the war – both for the National Socialists and for those groups (such as the Polish underground) who sought to bring attention to the Nazi atrocities.

4. 'The proof' that Hannah Arendt refers to probably includes *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People* compiled by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the Vaad Leumi and the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Scientists, since she published a critical review of this book in *The Commentary* in 1946 (see Arendt, 1994).
5. As Arendt (1992) famously argued, the Eichmann trial did not produce understanding either. It was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but instead wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime – the crime against humanity – appeared. This crime was perpetuated on the body of the Jewish people during the Second World War, but in Arendt's mind, the indictment must speak for all. A crime against humanity is a crime against the 'human status' without which the concept of 'humanity' would be utterly devoid of meaning. To try Eichmann for 'crimes against the Jewish people' failed to take into account the full implications of the Final Solution, which, for Arendt, actually constituted a profound attempt to annihilate the very concept of the human being (pp. 268–9).
6. Deborah Britzman's (2000) term 'difficult knowledge' addresses the psychical issues involved in encountering traumatic histories. 'Difficult knowledge' is a knowledge that demands something of the subject: 'a knowledge of the working through of the defense and the resistance to reorganizing one's ego boundaries in such a way that the original defense against encountering the other is not reenacted' (p. 42).
7. Throughout much of the Second World War, the Allied public maintained a guarded scepticism about the nature of the Nazis' barbarism. Early rumours and newspaper reports about the horrors of the concentration camps were largely dismissed as the exaggerations of anti-German propaganda. In the UK, this doubt was due largely to public memory of British propaganda from the First World War. During that war, official sources propagated false tales of German atrocity to bolster morale. So when the British Foreign Office released a 36-page White Paper on German atrocities in 1939, which explicitly detailed the beatings, torture and hard labour regularly inflicted on political prisoners in Germany, the public remained incredulous.
8. Lanzmann's position on historical images has sparked a wide debate around which there has grown an enormous literature. In recent years, however, his polemical stance has drawn dissent. Carol Zemel (2003) offers an important analysis of the iconic power of Miller's work. Georges Didi-Huberman also recently offered a close reading of four photographs taken in Auschwitz in August 1944 by the *Sonderkommando*, the 'special squad' of prisoners who operated the mass extermination with their bare hands. Didi-Huberman insists that the prisoners' efforts to snatch these pictures from the harrowing Real obliges us to look and to imagine Auschwitz for ourselves. In his words, the four photographs are 'four *refutations* snatched from a world that the Nazis wanted to obfuscate, to leave wordless and imageless' (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 20).
9. In a dispatch to *Vogue* dated 30 April, Miller describes arriving at Dachau the previous night but actually entering the camp the next morning, once the fighting was over (Miller, 1945b: 1).
10. The figures of the number of train cars and the number of people in them varies considerably from report to report (see Distel, 1990, and Marcuse, 2001: 51).
11. Several recent studies take this relationship between the visual field and trauma as their principal object of study (see, e.g., Guerin and Hallas, 2007; Dallmann et al., 2007; Saltzman and Rosenberg, 2006).
12. The contact sheets, vintage prints, and negatives housed at the Lee Miller Archives are all individually numbered. The image from inside the train is #76–16. There are

no images (negatives or prints) until the record resumes with #76–22, a shot of a solitary corpse lying beside the train.

13. In the fourth chapter of *Remembering to Forget*, Barbie Zelizer (1998) details the ways images of the liberation of the camps were presented in the Allied press.
14. Through what she calls 'postmemory', Marianne Hirsch (2001, 2008) has begun this work, arguing that photography constitutes the primary medium for the transgenerational transmission of trauma, an important dimension of cultural memory. While there is debate about the status of cultural memory and what, precisely, can be historically transmitted between generations (cf. Weismann, 2004), the present essay is an attempt to make finer distinctions about the specific operations and significance of visual testimony, especially as it relates to the communication of human experience. Although there is no space to elaborate here, another important approach to this question is Aby Warburg's work (and in particular his unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*). Warburg focused on the survival and return of cultural forms (what he called 'pathos formula') that he traced in the pictorial record from antiquity to the present (Warburg, 1997, 1999; Didi-Huberman, 2002).

References

- Arendt, H. (1992) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin.
- Arendt, H. (1994) 'The Image of Hell', in J. Kohn (ed.) *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*, pp. 197–205. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. (2000) 'What Remains? Language Remains', in P. Baehr (ed.) *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, pp. 13–14. New York: Penguin.
- Baer, U. (2005) *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Berben, P. (1975) *Dachau, 1933–1945: The Official History*. London: Norfolk Press.
- Britzman, D. (2000) 'If the Story Cannot End: Deferred Action, Ambivalence, and Difficult Knowledge', in R.I. Simon et al. (eds) *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Burke, C. (2005) *Lee Miller: A Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burke, P. (2001) *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Carter, Ernestine (ed.) (1941) *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*. New York: Scribner's.
- Caruth, C. (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Conekin, B. (2006) 'Lee Miller: Model, Photographer & War Correspondent in Vogue 1927–1953', *Fashion Theory* 10(1–2): 97–125.
- The Daily Mail* (1945) *Lest We Forget: The Horrors of Nazi Concentration Camps Revealed for All Time in the Most Terrible Photographs Ever Published*. London: Daily Mail and Association Press, Northcliffe House.
- Dallmann, A., Isensee, R. and Kneis, P. (eds) (2007) *Picturing America: Trauma, Realism, Politics, and Identity in American Visual Culture*. Frankfurt: Lang.
- Dann, S. (ed.) (1998) *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2002) *L'Image survivante: histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*. Paris: Minuet.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2008) *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. S.B. Lillis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Distel, B. (1990) 'The Liberation of the Concentration Camp at Dachau', *Dachau Review* 2: 3–11.
- Felman, S. (1994) 'Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in S. Felman and D. Laub (eds) *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Guerin, F and Hallas, R. (eds) (2007) *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory, and Visual Culture*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Hackett, D. (1995) 'Introduction', in *The Buchenwald Report*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Hibbs, B. (1945) 'Journey to a Shattered World', *Saturday Evening Post* 217, 9 June.
- Hirsch, M. (2001) 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', in B. Zelizer (ed.) *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hirsch, M. (2008) 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29(1): 103–28.
- Klein, M. (1975) *Love, Guilt, and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921–1945*. New York: Delacotte/Seymour Lawrence.
- Langer, L. (1991) *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lanzmann, C. (1995) 'The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann', in C. Caruth (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 200–20. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levi, P. (1989) *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Vintage.
- Liss, A. (1998) *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Marcuse, H. (2001) *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, L. (1944) 'Unarmed Warriors', *Vogue*, September: 35, 135.
- Miller, L. (1945a) 'Germany – The War that is Won', *Vogue*, June: 40–2, 84, 86, 89.
- Miller, L. (1945b) Dispatch to *Vogue*: 'Captions for Undeveloped Film' [taken in Dachau], dated 30 April. Lee Miller Archives (4 pages), Dachau Folder, Farley Farm House, East Sussex.
- Miller, L. (1992a[1944]) 'The Siege of St. Malo', in A. Penrose (ed.) *Lee Miller's War*. Boston: Bulfinch.
- Miller, L. (1992b[1944]) 'Cable to Audrey Withers, dated August 29, 1944', in A. Penrose (ed.) *Lee Miller's War*, p. 65. Boston, MA: Bulfinch.
- Miller, L. (nd) Dispatch to *Vogue*: 'Captions for undeveloped film' [taken in Buchenwald and Weimar]. Lee Miller Archives (4 pages), Buchenwald Folder, Farley Farm House, East Sussex.
- Murrow, E.R. (1945) *Buchenwald Report*. URL (consulted 4 July 2009): http://www.otr.com/murrow_buchenwald.shtml
- Novick, P. (1999) *The Holocaust in American Life*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Penrose, A. (1985) *The Lives of Lee Miller*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Penrose, A. (1992) *Lee Miller's War*. Boston, MA: Bulfinch.
- Saltzman, L. and Rosenberg, E.M. (eds) (2006) *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press.
- Stern, D. (1992) 'The "Pre-Narrative Envelope": An Alternative View of "Unconscious Phantasy" in Infancy', *Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre* 15: 291–318.
- Struk, J. (2004) *Photographing the Holocaust*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 'Dachau', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. URL (consulted 8 Nov. 2008): <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en>
- Van der Kolk, B.A. (1994) 'The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress', *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1(5): 253–65.

- Van der Kolk, B.A., McFarlane, A.C. and Weisaeth, L. (eds) (1996) *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Warburg, A. (1997) *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, trans. M. Steinberg. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Warburg, A. (1999) *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. D. Britt. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.
- Weismann, G. (2004) *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Zelizer, B. (1998) *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zemel, C. (2003) 'Emblems of Atrocity: Holocaust Liberation Photographs', in S. Hornstein and F. Jacobwitz (eds) *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, pp. 201–19. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sharon Sliwinski is Assistant Professor of Visual Culture in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. Her most recent articles include 'On Photographic Violence' published in *Photography and Culture* and 'The Aesthetics of Human Rights', in *Culture, Theory & Critique*. She is currently finishing a book called *Human Rights in Camera*, which traces the visual dimensions of human rights discourse.

Address: Faculty of Information & Media Studies, North Campus Bldg., Room 240, The University of Western Ontario, London, ONT, N6A 5B7, Canada. [email: ssliwins@uwo.ca]