(Un-)Framing Triumph and Trauma: Visibility, Gender and Liberation through the Soviet Gaze

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By our doors Great Victory stays...
But how we'll glory her advent?
Let women lift higher the children! They blessed
With life amidst a thousand thousands deaths
Thus will be the dearest answered.
Anna Akhmatova, ‘The Victory’ (1943-1945)

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it
Adrienne Rich, ‘Diving into the Wreck’ (1973)

It is difficult to envision the Holocaust without vestiges of familiar images springing to mind. In Martin Scorsese’s Shutter Island (2010), the protagonist, a U.S. Marshal played by Leonardo DiCaprio, experiences several flashbacks of the liberation of Dachau, in which he took part as a soldier in 1945. These flashbacks employ highly stylized Holocaust iconography: prisoners wearing striped uniforms, standing with their hands touching the barbed wired fences; carefully
staged piles of bodies covered with snow and sheathed in ice; a sign that reads ‘Arbeit macht frei’, resembling the gate to Auschwitz instead of the real Dachau entranceway. *Shutter Island* engenders and refashions this recognizable set of visual imprints to prompt an immediate recognition of the context depicted, thereby shedding light on the constructedness of visual memories about the Holocaust. By detaching well-known pictures from their original time-bound context, reshaping them into an aesthetic form, and placing them in a fictional setting, the film epitomizes the process through which the visual memory of this historical event has been constructed by strong and identifiable images that, through continuous appropriations, have become “secular icons” (Goldberg 1991): abstract and timeless images that condense qualities and ideas beyond their original referentiality.

Indeed, in the broad category of Holocaust imagery, the pictures of the liberation of concentration camps occupy a pivotal and enduring position. Ever since the end of World War II (WWII), a range of different pictures have been imprinted and later disappeared from the visual memory of the Holocaust only to later resurface within different frames of reference and discursive regimes. Nonetheless, the most persistent visual memories of Nazi terror have mostly been configured through images taken by American and British Allied forces upon liberating Western camps such as Buchenwald, Dachau or Bergen-Belsen. These so-called images of atrocity, or “icons of extermination” (Brink 2001), saturated by an aesthetic of grief and suffering, have come to define what has been termed a “visual canon” (Knoch 2001) of the Holocaust, which shaped a hegemonic, western visual memory of this historical period.

This visual canon is a discursive formation defined both by what it includes and what it excludes from its scope. It is a selective system that determines what is visible and what remains

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1 Vicky Goldberg defines “secular icons” as “representations that inspire some degree of awe [...] and stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs” (Goldberg 1991: 145). On Holocaust pictures as “secular icons” see Brink (2000).
unseen, what is remembered and what is forgotten. As Raymond Williams proposes for the concept of tradition, in a way that is equally applicable here, this is “[a]n intentionally shaping version of a past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of cultural and social definition and identification” (Williams 1977: 115). The victory of the Allies over the National Socialist regime and the legitimacy of their intervention in Germany was the underlying discourse that pervaded the visuality\(^2\) of liberations, which became, in William’s terms, the dominant “shaping version” of the Holocaust and WWII in the Western consciousness.\(^3\) As Bernd Hüppauf argues: “A popular image of the war had survived that was based upon highly selective memory” (Hüppauf 1997: 6).\(^4\) However, as recent scholarship has

\(^2\) By visuality I refer to the cultural construction of the visual under conditions of society and discourse. This encapsulates the structures of representation through which cultures are visualized and where “the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constant challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialised identities” (Mirzoeff 2009: 4). It is to be distinguished from “visibility”, which does not refer to the visual dimension of objects or events but rather to the underlying social, political, or ideological power structures that determine what is socially seen and not seen within visual regimes.

\(^3\) On Western coverage of the camps see Zelizer (1998) and Struk (2004). On the German perspective on this coverage see Brink (2001) and Knoch (2001).

\(^4\) Writing about the polemic exhibition *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (“Crimes of the *Wehrmacht* 1941 to 1944”), organized by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, which resorted to photographs that depicted the German Army as complicit in the Nazi extermination program, Hüppauf argues that Germany was not prepared to face this version of the past, which defied the national narrative of a country that perceived itself as a victim of the Nazi regime and remembered its soldiers as combatants in a grim war. The exhibition clearly showed that in each
begun to point out, the Holocaust must be regarded as a transcultural event with diverse implications across national and regional cultures (Rothberg 2009; Erll 2011; Crownshaw 2011). Each cultural space gives rise to its own representational regime that negotiates and competes with others for the defining visual memory of the event. The German visual memory of the Holocaust is certainly different from the Israeli and the Soviet ones, each one containing specific mnemonic imperatives for the configuration of national identities. As such, it is more accurate to speak of visual canons in the plural with such visual systems endorsing and shaping competing versions of the past within the contested terrain of memory.

Visual canons are therefore representational regimes built upon what Judith Butler calls frames of war, “operations of power” that “organize visual experience” and whereby the material reality of war operates and rationalizes its own conduct (Butler 2009: 3). These frames can assume different shapes: the frame of the photograph, the framing of an ideological position, the framing of sexual difference. Frames do not simply reflect the conditions of war; they carve and uphold both the visual structure that determines what should be visible and what should be unseen, and the conduct of war itself. Images are configured by the “pre-constituted field of discourse” (Burgin 2010: 136), but they also construct the social and cultural texture in which they will be received. As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, we have to take into account both the social construction of the visual and the visual construction of the social (Mitchell 2005: 343). As such, the photograph is not only the surface where ideology and power are made manifest; it is also the medium through which ideology and power are erected, sedimented, as well as contested and resisted. As Gertrud Koch contends, “die Einstellung ist die Einstellung”\(^5\), the frame is the country involved in the conflict the atrocity pictures were received against a different mindset or regime of truth that framed their interpretation. See also Heer (1995).

\(^5\) The German word ‘Einstellung’ designates an image shot, a frame, and a position, a stance towards a particular theme. Cf. Koch (1992).
framework: the frame of the photograph also entails the framing, the standpoint towards reality that defines how it should be visually represented and received. In line with Susan Sontag’s claim, photography is an opinion, as there is always a prior stance that conditions the photographic act. In framing reality, Butler further argues, “the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive” (Butler 2009: 67).

The framings of war that underlie visual canons regulate what shall be mourned, whose loss we should acknowledge, what should be commemorated, and what should remain unrepresentable to the viewer’s perception of conflict. As Butler contends, the “mandating of what can be seen”, the concern with regulating content, is complemented by control over the perspective through which things are seen (Butler 2009: 65). The frames of war thus operate through what I understand as a double logic of visibility by, on the one hand, allowing the suffering of certain figures to be brought into view and effacing undesirable grief from the field of representation and, on the other, in determining the perspective, the framing through which things are seen or not seen, thus guiding the viewer towards a certain interpretation of events.

Drawing from visual culture theory and gender studies, this article wishes to inquire into the Soviet framing of WWII and the Holocaust, and explore two intertwined questions within this particular visual canon: the negotiation between visibility and invisibility on the one hand, 

6 Cf. Sontag (2001). Sontag argued throughout her works that photography, due to its indexical nature, cannot be regarded as interpretation, but rather as an emanation of the real: “While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency” (Sontag 2001b: 6). However, in her later writings, namely in the introduction to Annie Leibovitz’ book Women, she began reconsidering her position and granting that some level of interpretation is at play in the act of photographing.
and the semiotic construction of gender on the other. This shall be tackled through the discussion of two moments of liberation. The first concentrates on the liberation of occupied territories on the Eastern front, with a special focus on Kerch and the Majdanek concentration camp; the second addresses the visual coverage of the liberation of Ravensbrück, the first purpose-built Nazi camp for women, reached by the Red Army just before the end of the war. By focusing on the visual framing of both moments of liberation, I wish to convey two points: first, that the Soviet frames of war are grounded on a negotiation between visibility and invisibility of the Holocaust that subsumes the Nazi targeting of Jews into the conduct of the so called Great Patriotic War, the Soviet struggle against Nazism. Secondly, that sexual difference, as a category produced within representation, is strongly regulated within the double logic of visibility, often appropriated to convey a dominant ideological standpoint. However, while its appearance as difference is cautiously measured, sometimes it manages to ‘frame the frame’ and counter the ideological script within which it emerged in the first place. This text suggests that the frames of war, despite exerting control over the subjects they depict, also contain within them the potential to unsettle hegemonic discourses and unravel traumas buried under layers of representation.

**Mourning and the Holocaust through the Soviet Gaze**

Soviet coverage of Nazi atrocities dates back to the early days of the German army’s incursion into the expanded Russian territory in 1941 and fluctuates between celebrating Soviet heroism and disclosing the violence of German invasion. Nazi atrocities were turned into a fundamental trope to represent the German war against ‘innocent Soviet citizens’, whose resistance and bravery were in turn praised. Indeed, soviet representation of WWII has often been described as negotiating triumph and trauma (Cf. Jahn 2005). In articulating these two motives, Soviet power attempted to rally the population, without demoralizing it, against German occupation.
As David Shneer has argued, “this dual narrative [...] visually defined the war for the Soviet population” (Shneer 2010: 96).

The first Holocaust liberation photographs produced by Soviets were taken in Kerch, in Ukraine, a region where the Gestapo registered seventy-five hundred Jews, who were then taken to a trench on the outskirts of town and shot. On 31 December 1941, the city was one of the first areas with a significant pre-war Jewish population to be liberated from German occupation, providing the first opportunity for Soviet soldiers, reporters, and photographers to witness and frame the Nazi violence against Jews on Soviet territory.

Despite the fact that the majority of photographers at the scene were Jewish\textsuperscript{7}, the event was framed through a universalizing perspective. Pictures showing an immense landscape of undifferentiated bodies spread along a trench alternated with close-up shots of dead women and children. In some, Red Army soldiers examine the scene and residents watch or search for relatives. Press captions refer to “Hitlerite atrocities in Kerch”\textsuperscript{8} or explain that “Hitler ordered his bandits to annihilate the peaceful Soviet population”, further universalizing, or rather ‘sovietising’, the visual narrative instead of providing a differentiated account of the violence depicted. These photographs frame the suffering of an integral population at the hands of the German enemy, establishing a “hierarchy of grief” (Butler 2006) that normalizes whose lives are supposed to be mourned. Jewish victims, however, were not effaced from the field of vision or

\textsuperscript{7} Evgenii Khaldei, Dmitrii Baltermants and Mark Redkin were some of the Jewish photographers among the first to witness the Kerch massacre. On Jewish photographers working for the Soviet Union during the Holocaust see Shneer (2010).

\textsuperscript{8} Soviets often used the terms ‘Hitlerite’ or ‘Fascist’ instead of ‘Nazi’ since the term ‘National-Socialism’ posited a problem for their own political discourse due to the reference to a Socialist vision. In the Soviet Union, Nazism was seen as a form of Western capitalism and hence the Socialist designation was avoided to hinder any parallels to Soviet Socialism.

openly excluded from mourning; instead, they were framed within a rhetoric that subsumed them into a broader narrative of grievability, shaping the event as a Soviet calamity. Therefore, invisibility does not necessarily demand an exclusion from the frame - symbolic invisibility can be produced inside the field of vision itself.

Within this strategy, the presence of Kerch residents mourning for their relatives constitutes a pivotal feature. Picturing the mourning of others constitutes a strategy that helps viewers identifying which lives should be mourned. It configures visual experience through a certain perspective that conditions the interpretation of the event depicted. The figure of the mourner, in numerous visual cultures, is often female. While in war photography the combat experience is dominated by male figures, when it comes to depicting the grief-stricken aftermath of violence, women immediately jump into the forefront of representational practices. The Soviet visual regime is certainly no exception.

As gaze theory has demonstrated, subject positions, male and female, are constructed by the gaze that inscribes them in the field of vision.9 The identity of depicted subjects relies, on the

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9 Gaze theory as developed by feminist film scholars, such as Laura Mulvey first and later by Mary Ann Doane and Kaja Silverman, builds upon Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, where he states that the gaze “is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me [the subject of representation], at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects” (Lacan 1998: 106). Lacan then brings in the concept of screen, a structure of mediation between the gaze and the subject of representation that introduces a level of opacity to the field of vision. Although Lacan does not argue so, feminist film theorists expand his thought to insist upon the ideological status of the screen and to contend that it is through “culturally generated images” that subjects, male or female, “are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and
one hand, “upon the repertoire of culturally available images” (Silverman 1992: 150), and upon an exterior gaze endowed with agency that subordinates them to a certain representation, on the other. Although the gaze points towards a regulating position of control that is located outside the frame, it does not conflate with an individual viewer or group of viewers, referring rather to an apparatus, a system of power relations that regulates subjectivities by projecting them in the field of vision. The subject captured inside the frame thus seemingly has no choice but to assume the shape predetermined by the “screen”, the level of mediated representation that introduces a dimension of opacity into the field of vision.

nationality” (Silverman 1992: 150). Contemporary gaze theory works outside (or even against) the strict conditions early Feminist film theory set out (namely the predominance of the male gaze over women as objects, as theorized in the early works of Mulvey), but keeps its attention to visual relations of unequal power that construct the subjects in the field of representation. Kaja Silverman’s reading of Fassbinder (1992) constitutes a seminal example of a new, critical gaze theory that draws on earlier work to rethink relations of power through the field of vision.
In figure 1, a woman with a Russian name mourns the death of a relative, supposedly her son, in what constitutes a common trope of atrocity representations. The image frames two instances of victimhood: the victims who perished under Nazi violence, and the survivors who suffer those losses. With bodies spilling out of the frame, the picture suggests a larger devastation than that captured, thus representing a broader dimension of victimhood. The Soviet gaze shapes the female figure as the suffering mother that mourns the loss of her son, making it representative of a wider, national grief: Mother Russia’s grief. In deploying the motherhood trope and identifying the woman’s body with the body politic of the Soviet nation, the female subject is framed as a representation of the collective mourning for a ravaged land. However, as Anne McClintock pointed out, “women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (McClintock 1996: 261). The trope of women’s fragility is visually convoked to raise empathy towards the target of
her mourning. Yet, an image of reassurance and stability is required to counter the threatening excess of difference that the female presence generates in the field of representation. In order to balance this vulnerability, a Soviet male is inscribed into the frame, preventing the female body from collapsing and guaranteeing safety upon liberation from the German enemy. To uphold the legitimization of Soviet intervention in this territory, mourning is visually codified as a gendered practice of female fragility that calls for a male agency capable of restoring the lost order. Liberation photographs, as said before, sought to negotiate between the representation of Nazi violence and Soviet superiority. By configuring two gendered subject positions, one of female vulnerability and another of male heroism, this image manages to frame both narratives within the same frame.

Photos from Kerch soon became formulaic and contributed towards shaping the so-called Nazi atrocity essay, which generally includes some form of trench, anonymous bodies with researchers investigating, residents witnessing, and close shots of women and children. The ravine, until the unearthing of the concentration camps on Polish soil, was the main visual narrative of atrocity in Soviet liberation photography. However, with the discovery of Majdanek, the first extermination camp encountered by the Red Army, in July 1944, the visuality of liberation had to face new challenges.

*SS Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, overseer of the concentration camps, had designated Majdanek as a camp for Soviet prisoners of war (POW) soon after the German invasion in 1941. The camp was initially called *Kriegsgefangenenlager der Waffen SS Lublin* – a camp for prisoners of war -, and in February 1943 was renamed *Konzentrationslager Lublin*. The official functions of a POW camp and concentration camp did not exhaust the tasks assigned to Majdanek by the German authorities - *Konzentrationslager Lublin* was definitely one of the cogs of the Final Solution. The State Museum at Majdanek sets the number of dead at about eighty thousand, sixty thousand of whom were Jews. However, only around 500 inmates, mostly
weak Soviet prisoners of war and a few Poles, survived to witness liberation. This certainly
defined the visual framing of the discovery of the camp, which, once again, downplayed the Nazi
targeting of Jews in order this time to focus on Polish victimhood.

Representations articulate and create meaning as well as re-present an already
meaningful world. In this case, the depiction of the newly discovered industrial dimension to
Nazi violence required new representational formulae to account for an unknown level of
destruction. The main novelty introduced consisted in framing the camp’s territory and the
several accoutrements of atrocity. This strategy, however, resulted in incomprehensible images
since the unearthed complex did not have a prior referent for the viewer to identify and
understand. As such, the older formulae had to be redeployed and reconfigured to foster a more
immediate identification.

In figure 2, the tropes of the ravine, the bewildered witnesses and the woman in
mourning as the main focus of the composition are reframed in a new set of circumstances. The
bodies of the victims are now invisible because the photographs of Kerch and other trenches, especially BabiYar\textsuperscript{10}, created a common frame of reference that is strongly present in collective conscience. With the trench images still in mind, imprinted in society’s “working memory”\textsuperscript{11}, the viewer is capable of reconstituting the absent bodies so that the off-frame is still visible within this frame, which thereby evokes or resonates with that preceding. This production of visibility, even in invisibility, goes hand in hand with the production of invisibility through the visible, in downplaying the Nazi targeting of Jews by framing the mourners as Polish citizens. While there are many people surrounding the mass grave, the shot displays a group of women that is represented through the single woman who raises her hands in despair. By electing this woman as the main focus of the composition, the Soviet gaze produces a larger subject in the frame, a collective group of witnessing women whose differentiated reactions are unified by this woman’s individual desperation, since ‘woman’, in signifying systems, tends to represent ‘womanhood’ at large. On the other hand, the Soviet gaze generates the look towards the mass grave, directing the viewer’s attention to the invisible picture within the picture, the visually absent but implicit victims of Nazi violence who are being mourned by the group of women.\textsuperscript{12} The Soviet gaze thus

\textsuperscript{10} Babi Yar, near Kiev, in Ukraine, an immense ravine into which about a hundred thousand bodies were dumped, became the biggest and most lasting symbol of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, overshadowing the discovery of the six main extermination camps located on Polish soil.

\textsuperscript{11} “Working memory” (\textit{Funktions-gedächtnis}), as opposed to “archival memory” (\textit{Speichergedächtnis}), is a concept coined by Aleida Assmann to refer to selective acts of recollection that circulate in a society and provide a common frame of reference for its members. Cf. Assmann (1999).

\textsuperscript{12} Lacan distinguishes gaze, to which he attributes the faculty of showing, from look, stating that the gaze precedes any individual act of looking and constitutes that out of which the look emerges (Lacan 1998).
produces a chain of looks: the viewer’s look is directed to the look of the woman who, in turn, activates the look at the partially framed grave. It is this chain of looks that produces the Polishness and elides the Jewishness of the event. By focusing first on the Polish griever, the viewer presumes the identity of the victims at the dead angle of representation.

The history of the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union remains a much debated question. For many years, the thesis that the Soviet Union tried to silence or conceal the Nazi targeting of Jews prevailed to a greater or lesser extent. Yeshoshua Gilboa, for example, argued that references to massacres of Jews were rare, “the dominant line adopted being not to single out such massacres from among the ‘criminal plans aimed at annihilating the Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, and other peoples of the Soviet Union’” (Gilboa 1971: 7-8). More recently, studies such as Karel Berkhoff’s have revealed that even though Soviet media often attempted to conceal that the Nazis were deliberately murdering Jews, in order to universalize the German threat to the entire Soviet population, this never became a policy. According to Berkhoff: “It was nothing but a tendency that never became entirely consistent” (2009: 62). Images produced during this period suggest this ambivalence, by simultaneously showing and not showing the specific targeting of Nazi violence. In subsuming the annihilation of Jews into the conduct of the Great Patriotic war, the Soviet gaze produces and at the same time elides both a subject and an interpretation of the events in a double logic of visibility. Even if the concealment of the Jewish extermination was a tendency that never became consistent, this hierarchy of grief generated a symbolic invisibility in favour of a sovietised narrative.

**Ravensbrück: Framing Liberation and Trauma**

By the time the Red Army reached the Ravensbrück concentration camp, on 30 April 1945, the battle for Berlin was finally coming to an end. Unlike the British and American forces, which had

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just recently started to unearth the camps in Germany, the Soviets already had a long experience with Nazi crimes. They had endured a three-year war with Germany and covered extensive atrocities throughout the territory of Soviet Union, particularly in Ukraine and Poland. Therefore, the discovery of Ravensbrück, close to Berlin, where the end of the conflict was about to be decided, represented a major shift in the visualization of the camps.

While the prior coverage of atrocities, like Kerch, Babi Yar, and Majdanek, fostered a narrative of devastation and wide-ranging Soviet suffering, the liberation of Ravensbrück was framed to render a narrative of survival, resistance, and freedom. Janina Struk, in her book *Photographing the Holocaust*, asks whether Britain or the USA would have released photographs of the Western camps with the “enthusiasm” they did, had the camps been full of their own nationals (Struk 2005: 143). This policy of (in)visibility might have been determinant to the Soviet record of survival and victory. The majority of the Ravensbrück population was not composed of Jewish women, who barely accounted for about ten percent of inmates, but political prisoners from several Eastern countries under Soviet influence. The conditions were thus established to, once again, obliterate the Jewish victimhood from the frame and focus on the Soviet population. The Red Army had to let their comrades know that the war against fascism had been won and that their prisoners were now safe, free and on their way home. On the other hand, they had to depict themselves as saviours to prove the legitimacy of the

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14 On the diversified composition and evolution of the Ravensbrück population throughout the war, see Leo (2006). Furthermore, shortly before liberation, the Swedish Red Cross had conducted a major rescue operation, known as Operation Bernadotte, and authorized by Himmler himself, which managed to rescue several Jewish inmates. The death marches were also responsible for sending a large part of the remaining camp population away so that upon liberation, the Red Army encountered only those inmates who were too physically feeble to leave.
occupation of Eastern territories. But what happens at the level of representation when the subjects are exclusively female?

As Jane Caplan has argued, the concentration camp remains gendered as male by default in most discourses, with gender difference being largely obliterated in favour of an unmarked masculine (Caplan 2010: 85). And yet, as Penny Summerfield has shown, WWII transfigured the ‘wartime gender contract’, “under which men fought for the protection of women, who, in return, maintained hearth and home as the cornerstone of the nation” (Summerfield 1997: 6). Indeed, all the regimes involved in the conflict envisioned new social roles for women, mobilizing the female population towards the war effort. The Soviet Union in particular, after calling up women into the ‘labour front’ and other support tasks, challenged the figure of the woman as a non-combatant through a militarizing action that allowed women to fight side by side with men on the war front. Despite the different degree of women’s involvement within the competing political forces, ranging from American and German promotion of women as supporters of men’s war efforts, to the Soviet rhetoric of gender equality, the boundaries between home front and war front, between the realm of the private and the sphere of public action, were definitely unsettled and in every case.

For further approaches on the gendered visuality of concentration camps, see Zelizer (2001) and, for a discussion of Zelizer’s conclusions, Weckel (2005). These studies are certainly a result of a wider attention granted to gender as a category of historical analysis in the field of Holocaust studies. See, for instance, Schwarz (2002), Baer and Goldenberg (2003), Bock (2005), Amsberger (2007), and Frietsch and Herkommer (2009).

On gender differentiations in social roles in Nazi Germany, see Frietsch and Herkommer (2009).

For a comparison between American, German and Soviet women’s involvement in the war effort see Franka Maubach and Silke Satjukow (2009).
This change in social roles carved a representational shift in the visual structure of war, thus destabilizing the domestic figuration in which women had hitherto been constrained. However, even though the mobilisation of women for the cause of ‘Total War’ was quite unprecedented, especially for Soviet women, who were allowed into the violence kernel of warfare, this new gender accomplishment was highly ambivalent for all the parties in conflict. As Maubach and Satjukow (2009) have shown, this social shift was extremely limited both in participation and duration, oscillating between inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, women’s involvement in the war effort was highly regulated in terms of the tasks performed and considered as an exception in times of need; after the conflict, their previous social roles would have to be restored. On the other hand, their involvement was constantly confronted with men’s scepticism and contempt, both within and between competing forces. German men referred to female Red Army soldiers scornfully as *Flintenweiber* [shotgunwomen], while their Soviet comrades, who often felt their own position as exclusive protectors threatened, referred to them as ‘Officer mattresses’ in an attempt to confine them to sexual roles. Representational practices throughout the war mirror this inconsistency towards women’s wartime subject positions, vacillating between an emancipatory and conservative depiction.

The experience of imprisonment in a women’s concentration camp is also culturally ambivalent: while, on the one hand, it challenges the association of women with the home front, placing them within a new sphere of war experiences defying various archetypes of femininity,  

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18 In America, the demand put on industry by the war machine was massive. With about ten million men at war and the rest of the male population at work, it became clear the only way America would be able to win the war was if it enlisted large numbers of women for employment in the industry sector. After the war, however, ‘Rosie the Riveter’, as women in working in industry were called, was often required to return to her previous domestic occupations and to ‘give Joe back his job’. See Honey (1984) and Gil (2009).
on the other, it resituates them in a condition of vulnerability and in an exclusively feminine domain, superiorly controlled by a male dominated system that reinstates gendered practices of living and organization. The portrayal of women who endured and survived the hardships of warfare and of a concentration camp also represents a shift in the Soviet visual grammar of war, which alongside the propaganda images of a robust and resistant Mother Russia had oscillated between depicting women as victims or as grieving witnesses of Nazi violence. Nevertheless, the photos taken at Ravensbrück resorted to the same articulation of tropes of motherhood and nationhood seen before. In figure 3, for example, Ukrainian mothers hold their children, who were born in the camp shortly before liberation. Even if it is possible that the barrack depicted housed only Ukrainians, it is far from innocent that the picture frames a group of mothers that share the same nationality.

Figure 3 Ukrainian mothers with their babies, who were born in the camp shortly before liberation, May 1945. Photographer: Jirka Volejnik (presumably). Courtesy Mahn-und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte.

While the depiction of surviving women defies the trope of fragility that had thus far pervaded the coverage of atrocities, at the same time it reinstates the reverse stereotype of
women’s resilience and nurturing vocation to support a narrative of birth and survival, proving that the appropriation of the very same trope of motherhood can serve differing scripts. In this case, the normative usage of the symbolical role of women as breeders wishes to send out an encouraging message to a country like Ukraine that had been one of the most devastated during the course of the Great Patriotic War, but which now, under the protection of Soviet power, was able to return to safety. Their liberation by male Red Army soldiers could thus be seen as a reinstatement of the wartime gender contract, whereby women’s vulnerability and the protective male role are re-established. On a different level, this image may be considered an attempt to counter-frame the previous frames of war, whereby a new discursive regime is striven for, one that prefigures the approaching Cold War and its territorial reconfiguration.

Women’s bodies are thus symbolically constructed by the Soviet gaze as a medium through which victory over fascism is conveyed and Soviet control over Ukraine is legitimized. However, this picture hides a terrible event that undermines its meaning. According to Hanka Housková, a former Czech Communist inmate who witnessed the liberation, one of the Ukrainian women was raped by a Soviet soldier. Under this traumatic revelation, the depiction of the reproductive female body shifts to an image of gendered vulnerability and destabilizes the surface of representation, deconstructing the image of the liberator and problematising the concept of ‘liberation’ itself. As Elisabeth Bronfen observed, “[r]epresentations are symptoms that visualise even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully” (Bronfen 1992: xi). The excessive female body, which was carefully stabilised under a narrative of motherhood, is unveiled in its full and dangerous ambivalence upon this disclosure.

19 On the ambivalence of the Ukrainian memory of World War II, see Scherrer (2004).

20 The history of Ravensbrück regarding the question of rape is still in the making. See, for instance, Jolande Withuis (2002).
Hannah Arendt once claimed that all photos of concentration camps are misleading as they try to reproduce a reality that was no longer to be seen.\textsuperscript{21} The Soviet framing of Ravensbrück is “misleading” in many directions: not only does it opt to leave the level of destruction and degradation outside the frame in order to put forward a narrative of survival and resistance, but it also prevents the disclosure of the ambivalent circumstances in which the liberation was carried out. However, the traumatic off-frame of this picture, once revealed, ends up bearing a trap to the assigned meaning, thereby framing the frame and challenging the scopic subordination to the Soviet gaze.

Shortly after liberation, the Red Army installed a repatriation facility for political prisoners and civilians at Ravensbrück to help inmates return to their countries\textsuperscript{22}. Figure 3, which portrays a group of women before their homecoming, presumably a month after their

\textsuperscript{21} “All pictures of concentration camps are misleading insofar as they show the camps in their last stages, at the moment the Allied troops marched in. [...] what provoked the outrage of the Allies most – namely, the sight of the human skeletons – was not at all typical for the German concentration camps; extermination was handled systematically by gas, not by starvation. The condition of the camps was a result of the war events during the final months” (Baehr 2003: 142).

\textsuperscript{22} After the war, many concentration camps in the Soviet occupation zone were turned into Soviet secret service (NKVD) special camps, internment camps for political prisoners set up by the Soviet Military Administration in Germany and run by the NKVD. In August 1948, the camps were made subordinate to the Gulag. Because no contacts between camp internees and the outside world were permitted, the special camps were also known as silence camps. This is not the case with Ravensbrück but might explain the necessity to register the aftermath of its liberation as a repatriation facility to becloud the internment camps to be installed in nearby Sachsenhausen or even in Buchenwald. Cf. Haustein (2006).
liberation, is paradigmatic of the Soviet framing of this camp. On the one hand, it is a collective shot of undifferentiated Soviet women set against a background that is completely devoid of any atrocity connotation. The context of violence and degradation is kept out of the frame and substituted by an idyllic summer scenario that prefigures the desirable aftermath of the conflict for all Soviet citizens. This image attempts to configure a return both to the idyllic homeland, from where Soviet people had been involuntarily expelled and longed to return to, and to a social and political normalcy that circumscribes women into a contained realm of action. Nevertheless, this picture also reverses the domestic trope and, once again, defies submission to the Soviet gaze by inscribing an entirely new figure into the representation of war: the homecoming woman.

![Figure 4](image.png)

**Figure 4** Soviet women before their homecoming, May/June 1945. Courtesy Mahn-und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte.

Indeed, as Christina Twomey (2009) has pointed out, WWII brought a social change by destabilizing the gender of homecoming, since women also returned, either from their workplace, where they had secured continuity on the home front, but especially in their quality of victims of war displacement, challenging the gulf between the gendered domains of military
front and the home front that sustained the wartime gender contract. War is a time when notions of belonging are unsettled and gender conventions are simultaneously undermined – with women entering new spheres of experience - and restored – with the threat to gender boundaries being constantly contained. The return from imprisonment exposes once again this ambiguity, as it becomes a return both from a new and defying experience and to the original and contained realm of existence that, in fact, cannot be retrieved. Homecoming is often a traumatic moment as much as the war itself is as it carries with it the struggle to adapt to post-war normalisation and to cope with awful memories. The trauma of imprisonment, violence, rape, hunger, death, and, in some cases, killing is often manifested belatedly after the homecoming, resurfacing to haunt the aftermath of a painful experience. The photo also clouds this trauma of return and, in picturing a natural landscape in the background, reinforces women’s stereotypical relation to nature, thrusting her away from the cultural domain of war. In fact, the women are depicted in an attempt to normalize refeminisation, appearing healthy, fed and nicely dressed, and in a setting that recalls a big family portrait, prefiguring women’s return to their breeding and nurturing functions. The photograph thus frames the narrative of return in a dual way: while it can be visually controlled and subsumed by the Soviet framing into a return to social normalcy, it can also be interpreted against the grain as a figuration of a traumatic experience that had been invisible up till then, thus disrupting the contained subjectivity inscribed by the Soviet gaze.

In spite of the multiple roles women performed during wartime, the photographic record of the liberation of Ravensbrück does not provide a differentiated account of the experiences of its inmates, focusing instead on large groups in which individual identities are diluted. One of the few exceptions is a portrait of Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier (fig. 5), a French member of the Resistance and widow of Paul Vaillant-Couturier, co-founder of the French Communist Party and chief editor of *L’Humanité*. Marie-Claude was a photographic reporter, at the time
when the business was almost uniquely male, which earned her the nickname of ‘the lady in Rolleiflex’. She was part of the photo service of *L’Humanité*, which she later edited. Attached to the magazine *Vu*, she participated in an investigation into the rise of National Socialism in Germany, where she took clandestine pictures of the concentration camps in Oranienburg (Sachsenhausen) and Dachau, published upon her return to France. Within the Resistance, she partook in clandestine publications and anti-German propaganda and also worked as a liaison between the civil and military Resistance, which got her arrested and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where together with Charlotte Delbo, she was a member of the clandestine international Resistance committee. She was transported to Ravensbrück in August 1944 but would only return to France in June 1945, staying on in the camp after liberation to provide assistance to the remaining sick inmates.
Unlike the other pictures, which resort to rather normative tropes of representation that over-gender and circumscribe the subjects depicted within a contained realm of action, this portrait allows the person depicted to figure as autonomous and assume a heroic status, even if within the larger narrative that underlies the entire photographic operation. Her expression of triumph and relief is framed as an homage to those who contributed to the defeat of fascism, not only on the battle front, but also through the international resistance groups established in captivity. Once again, nothing in this portrait translates the pained experience of a concentration camp, except the exhilarating sense of freedom that comes with liberation, bringing it closer to the victory pictures taken in Berlin upon the German surrender.
Nevertheless, in framing the ‘lady in Rolleiflex’, who once photographed the rise of National Socialism and its first concentration camps, the picture appropriates the subject of a resistant gaze to self-reflect on the victory of the Soviet gaze over the Nazi image-world. This interdependency of gazes – the woman depends on the Soviet gaze to exist in the field of vision, but the Soviet gaze depends on her gaze to convey a certain meaning – destabilises the power relation of vision, opening up a potential for visual agency from within the picture that challenges the gaze outside the picture. As Kaja Silverman has argued in her positive reading of Lacan, “some limited power is available to the subject who recognizes her necessary subordination to the gaze but finds potentially transgressive ways of ‘performing’ before it” (Silverman 1992: 128). As such, this picture exposes a fundamental contradiction: it praises the gaze as resistance by assuming control over someone else’s resistant gaze, hence disclosing the structural tension between visual regulation and subversion within the frames of war.

The Visible, the Unseen, and the Dead Angles of Representation

Frames of war are structurally governed by a double logic of visibility. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, the photos taken by the Allies constituted an attempt to make visible what was no longer to be seen. The Nazi camp system itself was built upon a logic of invisibility, of erasing all remains of extermination and keeping them out of sight. The Soviet canon of liberation also lies on a negotiation between visibility and invisibility. While, in a first moment, the Soviet gaze showed and did not show the targets of Nazi violence, diluting the extermination of Jews into a larger Soviet narrative of victimhood, in a second moment it effaced trauma from the visual surface to allow a narrative of Soviet triumph to simmer through. However, as Foucault argued: “Transgression is an action that involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses” (Foucault 2000: 73). Indeed, it is
precisely in this liminality between visible and invisible, at the dead angles of representation, that room for subversion may be carved out to dispute the convention according to which the gaze is impossible to seize or get hold of.

Sexual difference is also a category entangled in this double logic of visibility. As potential validation and simultaneous disruption of a visual order that excludes her, as a source of threatening ambivalence, its appearance in the field of vision is cautiously restrained. At other times, however, it manages to irrupt through the regulated surface of representation in its fullest and most unsettling shape. Susan Sontag once claimed a photograph represents a means of acquiring, of gaining control over a subject (Sontag 2001b: 155). Indeed, in capturing reality, the photograph constructs and attributes an identity to the subject fixed inside the frame, determining the perspective through which the visual event will be interpreted. Yet, the subjects produced through this gaze are not condemned to remain trapped inside the picture – the threshold of liberation is there to be crossed. The dead angles on the visual surface, like Adrienne Rich’s “ladders hanging innocently”, can “open a zone to existence for the first time” (Foucault 2000: 74), and not only frame the frame, but indeed unframe subjects from the visual grids that seize them.

Works cited


