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The Gendered Visuality of Liberation. Ravensbrück and the Holocaust Visual Canon

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It is difficult to envision the Holocaust without traces of familiar images coming to mind. In Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010), based on Dennis Lehane's novel of the same name, 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 corpses covered with snow and sheathed in ice; a sign that reads „Arbeit macht frei“, resembling the Auschwitz gate instead of the Dachau one. *Shutter Island* resorts to this recognizable set of visual imprints to engender an immediate identification of the context depicted and thus shedding light on the constructedness of the visual memory of the Holocaust. By detaching identifiable pictures from their original time-bound context, reshaping them into an aesthetic, oniric, almost hallucinatory form, and placing them in a fictional setting, the film mirrors the process through which the visual memory of this historical event has been constructed by strong identifiable images that, through constant semantic transformations and appropriations, have become secular icons¹: abstract and timeless images that condense qualities and ideas beyond their original referentiality.

¹ Vicky Goldberg defines „secular icons“ as „representations that inspire some degree of awe [...] and stand for an epoch or a system of beliefs“ (Vicky Goldberg: *The Power of Photography. How Photographs Changed Our Lives*. New York: Abbeville Press 1991, p. 145). On Holocaust pictures as

For the last sixty years, an array of different pictures have been imprinted and later disappeared from the visual memory of the Holocaust, resurfacing again later on within different frames of reference and discursive practices. In the broad category of Holocaust imagery, the pictures of the liberation of the concentration camps occupy a pivotal and enduring position. The strongest visual memories of the Nazi terror have been constructed mostly through images taken by the American and British Allied forces upon the liberation of Buchenwald, Dachau or Bergen-Belsen. These so-called images of atrocity or „icons of extermination“² have come to define a „camp aesthetics“³ and what has been termed as a „visual canon“⁴ of the Holocaust, which shaped a hegemonic visual memory of this historical period.

This visual canon is a discursive formation defined both by what it harbours and what it excludes from its scope. It is a selective system that determines what is visible and what remains unseen, what is remembered and forgotten. Against this backdrop, this article proposes to explore the visuality⁵ of a camp that has remained outside this

„secular icons“ see Cornelia Brink: *Secular Icons. Looking at Photographs from Nazi Concentration Camps*. In: *History & Memory* 12 (Spring/Summer 2000) 1, pp. 135–150.

² Cornelia Brink: *Ikonen der Vernichtung. Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945*. Berlin: Akademie 1998.

³ Liliane Weissberg: *Memory Confined*. In: Dan Ben-Amos / Liliane Weissberg (Eds.): *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press 1999, pp. 45–76.

⁴ See Habbo Knoch: *Die Tat als Bild. Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2001. Also Barbie Zelizer: *Remembering to Forget. Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press 1998.

⁵ By visuality we understand the cultural construction of the visual under conditions of society and discourse. It refers to the structures of representation through which culture is 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 racialized identities“ (Nicholas Mirzoeff: *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge 2009, p. 4). It is to be distinguished from „visibility“, which does not refer to the visual dimension of objects or events, but rather to the

canon, the women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück. This camp owns a particular status within the politics of representation. On the one hand, being a women's camp restrained its potential rhetoric universality; unlike Dachau or Buchenwald, it could not represent the overall experience of extermination, but rather a female experience of the Holocaust that could easily undermine a more universalizing narrative. On the other hand, Ravensbrück was liberated by the Red Army, which did not share the policy of visualization of atrocity endorsed by the American or British forces, nor their political agenda. These reasons, amongst others, have determined a discursive invisibility of the camp's liberation, which translated itself into the absence of an acknowledgeable visual narrative of Ravensbrück.

This article wishes to address the visual rhetoric of the liberation of this camp within the broader visual system of the Holocaust. Understanding images as a „complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, bodies, and figurality“⁶, I will begin by investigating the rhetorical properties of the Western liberation pictures and the process of their canonization, and then move on to focus on the photographic record of Ravensbrück to tackle two main questions: if the visibility of Ravensbrück entails a particular or distinct rhetoric from the canonical representation and if gender works as an idiom of atrocity⁷, that is, if the photographic depiction of women is graphed as difference, as a gender-specific mode of representation.

The Western liberation and the visual canon

underlying social or political power structures that determine what is socially seen and not seen.

⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell: *Picture Theory*. Chicago / London: Univ. of Chicago Press 1994, p. 16.

⁷ I borrow the term from Marianne Hirsch, who uses the expression „idiom of remembrance“ to address gender specific mnemonic and representational strategies in artistic practices. See Marianne Hirsch: Täter-Fotografien in der Kunst nach dem Holocaust. Geschlecht als ein Idiom der Erinnerung. In: Insa Eschebach et al. (Eds.): *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht. Deutungsmuster in Darstellungen des Nationalsozialistischen Genozids*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus 2002, pp. 203–226.

The visual canon of the Holocaust is not a stable, closed and homogeneous deposit of visual impressions. It is rather a dynamic body of changing, conflicting and ideologically charged images and counter-images, constantly defied by different political moments, historical narratives, national cultures, identity groups, memory waves and shifting discursive frames.

After the war, the Enlightenment politics of the Western Allies strongly influenced and defined the visual memory of the NS-period through the pictures of the liberation of the camps. The record of the liberation was mandated to be seen. General Eisenhower's „let the world see“ politics called upon photography as an instrument to enlighten the world about Nazi action. The political agenda of this record operation was twofold: convince a disbelieving Western public of the atrocities of the Nazi regime and thus legitimize the Allied intervention; and holding the entire German community co-responsible for the National-Socialist destruction. The photographic depiction of the camps thus had to convey a narrative of unprecedented brutality and devastation.

From the first week of April 1945 onward, US forces entered a series of camps, including Ohrdruf, Nordhausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Mathausen. At about the same time, British forces entered Bergen-Belsen. Groups of professional, semi-professional, and amateur photographers, as well as soldiers with their own cameras, accompanied the liberating forces into the camps. No one was prepared to face the brutality that they encountered, so photographers, like reporters, received few guidelines about what kind of work was expected from them. The most frequent early objects of depiction were among those that later resurfaced as Holocaust iconography – piles of skulls and corpses, heaps of ashes and bones, barbed-wire fences, camp courtyards, crematorium chimneys and furnaces, barracks and several remains. As Hannah Arendt once observed, this depiction of the camps does not convey the real ‚concentration camp universe‘, but rather its final phase of degradation near the end of the war.⁸ The visual program of the Allies profited largely from this terminal stage of

⁸ „[...] 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.

the camp system, which granted them a paroxystic impression of the Nazi brutality. How was this visually translated?

The photos provided a visual dimension to two main narrative focuses that were particularly instrumental within the underlying political agenda: the camp's territory and the act of witnessing.⁹ The camp's territory was depicted as a general topography of atrocities. The territorial features were captured in ways that metonymically referred to the atrocities taking place in other locations.



Fig. 1. View of the main street of the Nordhausen concentration camp, outside of the central barracks (Boelke Kaserne), where the bodies of prisoners have been laid out in long rows, April 13-14, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of

[...] 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.“ Peter Baehr (Ed.): *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. London: Penguin 2003, p. 142.

⁹ See Barbie Zelizer: *Remembering to Forget* (note 4), pp. 86–140.

Michael Mumma.¹⁰

These wide-ranging and abstract shots invoked the broader scope of Nazi horror by depicting one scene of the camp's territory and making it representative of all the Nazi systematic destruction (fig. 1). Normally with bodies spilling out of the frame, suggesting a larger reality than the one captured, the photos worked as symbols of that broader context.



Fig. 2. General Dwight Eisenhower and other high ranking U.S. Army officers view the bodies of prisoners who were killed during the evacuation of Ohrdruf, April 12, 1945.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.

The other key visual strategy concentrated on the act of bearing witness. Images of witnessing became a separate category of atrocity representation with pictures showing large groups of individuals, especially German civilians, examining evidence of the

¹⁰ The views or opinions expressed in this article, and the context in which the images are used, do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

atrocities. The aim of this strategy was, once again, to reinforce the indexicality and authenticity of the atrocities unearthed by the Western allies. This device was especially efficient when reliable official figures were pictured, as in the case of General Eisenhower (fig. 2).

Under this category of representation, a further recurrent strategy consisted in showing German civilians exhuming mass graves or transporting corpses under the supervision of the Allied forces, which visually underpinned the responsibility of the entire German community. Another crucial feature of these pictures consisted in showing witnesses to the atrocities without framing the atrocities themselves (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Two German women file past piles of corpses outside the crematorium in the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp, April 1, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Patricia A. Yingst.

This type of shot turned out to be particularly prolific, since it fitted certain newspaper policies, especially during the years after the war, which avoided publishing images that

might be too shocking or raise too much bewilderment.¹¹ On the other hand, these photos implied the knowledge and recognition of the other atrocity pictures, thereby suggesting a reality that was outside the frame but strongly fixed in the collective conscience.

A further compositional strategy of the liberation photos concerned the number of people depicted. The photos alternated between collective and individual shots. Collective shots portrayed mass graves, piled bodies, and remains; individual shots were particularly suited to depict the *Muselmann* figure. Taken together, the images translated both individual agony and the far-reaching nature of mass destruction, suggesting that the depiction of each individual experience of horror represented a wider or universal one. They were particularly instrumental in negotiating a leap from referential to symbolic representation. Overall, these compositional practices suggested a broader level of the story that went beyond the concrete target of photographic depiction.

The representation of women within this visual program is remarkably problematic and ambivalent. As Sigrid Jacobeit noticed: „Die Existenz der Konzentrationslager ist im öffentlichen Bewusstsein männlich konnotiert.“¹² In other words, the visual canon is naturalised as a male one. On the one hand, gender did not necessarily figure as a

¹¹ On the shifting memory waves after the war see Barbie Zelizer: *Remembering to Forget* (note 4), pp. 141–170; Janina Struk: *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the Evidence*. London: I. B. Tauris 2005, pp. 150–171; and Habbo Knoch: *Die Tat als Bild* (note 4), pp. 166–425.

¹² Sigrid Jacobeit: Vorwort. In: Insa Eschebach et al. (Eds.): *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht* (note 7), p. 10. On recent gendered approaches to the Holocaust see also Gudrun Schwarz: *During Total War, We Girls Want to be Where We Can Really Accomplish Something. What Women Do in Wartime*. In: Omer Bartov et al. (Eds.): *Crimes of War. Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*. New York: New Press 2002, pp. 121–137; Elizabeth R. Baer / Myrna Goldenberg (Eds.): *Experience and Expression. Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press 2003; Gisela Bock (Ed.): *Genozid und Geschlecht. Jüdische Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem*. Frankfurt a. M.: Campus 2005; and Elke Frietsch / Christina Herkommer (Eds.): *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht. Zur Politisierung und Ästhetisierung von Körper, „Rasse“ und Sexualität im „Dritten Reich“ und nach 1945*. Bielefeld: Transcript 2009.

relevant representational category for the agenda of these atrocity pictures, which sought a wider and universal atrocity story. The portrayal of women within this framework could easily undermine the thrust towards universality by suggesting a mark of difference. On the other hand, on a symbolic level, women could also embody the culturally codified tropes of frailness and vulnerability that the broader atrocity story called for.

Therefore, women had to be depicted strategically in order to fit this general (or male) atrocity narrative. Although women assumed different configurations in the concentration camps, their depiction was restricted.¹³ Because women are culturally essentialized as more vulnerable than men, the brutality both against women and perpetrated by women was seen as „doubly atrocious“¹⁴ and therefore deliberately emphasized in the photographic records of the camps. The representation of women was thus strongly polarized, oscillating between the tropes of the fragile female body and the nurturing mother and, on the other hand, the cruel and spiteful Nazi perpetrator.

One of the most recurring tropes, for instance, is the female ability to cope with tragedy and return to normalcy. Many shots showed individuals or groups of women performing domestic and maternal tasks, emphasizing their capacity to nurture and carry on (fig. 4). This type of depiction provided a strong counter-image to the most appalling scenes of atrocity, working as a device to appease the viewers and help them overcoming the shock raised by the more gruesome images of the camps.

¹³ Barbie Zelizer identifies and analyzes four instances of figuration of women in the camps, namely as victims, as survivors, as witnesses, and as perpetrators. See Barbie Zelizer: Gender and Atrocity. Women in Holocaust Photographs. In: Barbie Zelizer (Ed.): *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*. London: Athlone Press 2001, pp. 247–269. For a discussion of Zelizer’s conclusions see Ulrike Weckel: Does Gender Matter? Filmic Representations of the Liberated Nazi Concentration Camps, 1945–46. In: *Gender & History*, 17 (November 2005) 3, pp. 538–566.

¹⁴ Barbie Zelizer: Gender and Atrocity (note 13), p. 255.



Fig. 4. Female survivors peel potatoes in a barracks in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, April 28 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, courtesy of Jack & Iris Mitchell Bolton.

This means that the visual program of the Allies deliberately avoided reflecting the full range of women's existence in the camps. Activities of resistance, heroism, and autonomy were rarely accounted for. Despite the documents that attest to the multidimensional reality of female prisoners, but also the nuanced and differentiated levels of perpetrators and bystanders, only certain tropes of representation persisted, leaning towards those categories that could be perceived as fragile and nurturing or atrocious and cruel.

Ultimately, the photographic record of the liberation fluctuates between two opposite poles: either obliterating gender differences for the benefit of a deceptively neutral universal narrative, or over-gendering representation and accentuating mythical or culturally codified stereotypes of womanhood in favour of the comprehensibility and rhetorical effectiveness of that very same narrative.

In conclusion, the underlying message in the atrocity reporting was the Allied victory and the superiority of Western democracy over the National Socialist regime.

Photographs that were able to convey this story were especially sought-after. In fact, as the Western democracies were absorbed in publicizing the horrors unearthed by their own liberations, discoveries made by the Russians were widely ignored. By the time the Western Allies had begun to liberate the camps in Germany, the Soviet Army had already liberated Majdanek and Auschwitz in January 1945. Although a large amount of information had reached the West about the extermination camps during war, their liberation was hardly reported in the Western press due to a general scepticism towards Russian reporters. With the end of the Second World War in sight, and with the Cold War about to begin, the attitude of the Western powers towards the Russians was beginning to shift from regarding them as allies to a Communist threat. As a result, the Western public opinion was left with the impression that the Western concentration camps represented the entirety of Nazi atrocities. Therefore, the visual canon as we know it is mostly a Western system of beliefs.

„Trunken vor Freiheit“ – The Liberation of Ravensbrück

The concentration camp of Ravensbrück was liberated by the Red Army and therefore displays a particular economy of representation. Unlike the American and British forces, the Soviets had little need of atrocity images to convince their public of the veracity and scale of the Nazi regime. They had endured a three-year war with Germany and atrocities committed by the Nazis were widely known about. This means that the visual program of the Soviet liberation entailed an entirely different frame of reference that did not match the prevailing pattern of the Western ‚atrocity image‘ Ravensbrück is a case in point.

The liberation of this women’s concentration camp has a particular history. Shortly before the liberation by the Soviet Army on April 30 1945, several inmates were rescued by the Swedish and Danish Red Cross in two different moments. This rescue operation, known as „Action Bernadotte“ (after Count Graf Folke Bernadotte, head of the Swedish

Red Cross), and authorized by Himmler himself,¹⁵ is responsible for the largest part of the visual record related to the camp. In comparison to this rescue operation, the liberation has a rather small photographic coverage.

Several historical contingencies have determined this brief record. In May 1945, a week after the camp was liberated, a commission composed of Soviet officers and prison inmates drafted a record for future reference that contained several information about the camp's reality. This record included ten photographs that illustrated the facilities, procedures and actions described. Although this document was filed in the Russian Archives, the photos were supposedly never found. From the record description, it would seem that these photographs served the purpose of proving the written information, depicting the barracks, the barb-wired wall, the gas chambers, the crematorium (with corpses inside), etc.¹⁶

The Liberation images that are known about stem from three different proveniences.¹⁷ The ones taken by the officer Michael Goldberg, a Russian front

¹⁵ On this rescue operation see Simone Erpel: *Rettungsaktion in letzter Minute. Die Befreiung von Häftlingen aus dem Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück durch das Internationale Komitee des Roten Kreuzes, das Dänische und Schwedische Rote Kreuz*. In: Sigrid Jacobeit (Ed.): *„Ich grüße Euch als freier Mensch“*. *Quellenedition zur Befreiung des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück im April 1945*. Berlin: Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten and Edition Hentrich 1995, pp. 22–79. See also Simone Erpel: *Zwischen Befreiung und Vernichtung. Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück in der letzten Kriegsphase*. Berlin: Metropol 2005.

¹⁶ This record is reproduced in Bärbel Schindler-Saefkow: *Die Befreiung des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück*. In: Sigrid Jacobeit (Ed.): *„Ich grüße Euch als freier Mensch“* (note 15), pp. 175–182.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, not all of the photographs available are identified, which posits several challenges to their analysis. Despite their fragile historical status though, they should not be excluded from research and interpretative work. On working with uncontextualized pictures see Ulrich Hägele: *Autor, Ort, Datum unbekannt. Über das Problem der Kontextualisierung in der Kriegsfotografie*. Paper presented at the conference „Fremde im Visier. Private Fotografie der Wehrmachtssoldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg“, University of Oldenburg, July 16th 2005, <http://www.unicoaching.de/download/2-kriegsfotografie.pdf>, 16.12.2010.

journalist who was not a photo reporter; the ones taken by a Czech photographer, Jirka Volejnik, who was responsible for covering the repatriation of Czech inmates;¹⁸ and the ones found in the Russian Federation Archive under the tag „Repatriierungslager Nr. 222 (Summer 1945)“, taken by a presumably official Russian photographer named Lysenko.¹⁹

Some of these photographs exhibit similar features to those taken in the Western camps, but overall they seem to reveal an entirely different discursive frame. While the photographic record of the Western Allies exhibited a narrative of wide-ranging devastation and collective witnessing, that not only aimed at convincing a disbelieving public of the atrocities committed but also to held all the Germans morally responsible for it, the Soviet depiction wishes to convey a narrative of survival, resistance, freedom, and heroism.

Janina Struk, in her book *Photographing the Holocaust*, asks herself whether Britain or the USA would have released photographs of the Western camps with the „enthusiasm“ they did, if the camps had been full of their own nationals.²⁰ This policy of (in)visibility might have been determinant to the Soviet record of survival and liberty. The majority of the Ravensbrück population was composed not of Jewish women, who made up about ten percent of the inmates, but of political prisoners from

¹⁸ These pictures were donated to the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück by the former Czech Communist inmate Hanka Housková, who worked as a nurse at the camp and witnessed the liberation. See Hanka Housková: *Monolog*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich 1993.

¹⁹ These pictures were found by the historian Ulrike Huhn in 2009 at the Russian Federation Archive in Moscow (GARF) and refer to the repatriation facility for Soviet political prisoners and civilians installed by the Russian Army in Ravensbrück in June 1945. The photos were taken between June and October. See Ulrike Huhn / Cord Pagenstecher: *Neue Bilder von Ravensbrück. Fotos aus dem Repatriierungslager Nr. 222 (Sommer 1945)*. In: *Zwischenräume. Displaced Persons, Internierte und Flüchtlinge in ehemaligen Konzentrationslagern 1945–1953*. Ed. by KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme. Bremen: Edition Temmen 2010, pp. 190–193.

²⁰ Janina Struk: *Photographing the Holocaust* (note 11), p. 143.

several Eastern countries under Soviet influence.²¹ 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. This political program, interestingly enough, was made visible through compositional strategies not that different from the Western ones. But what happens at the level of representation when the inmates are exclusively female? How is gender figured and deployed within this particular discursive framework? I will focus on three examples to shed light on the similarities and differences between Western and Soviet visual approaches, and on the role of gender within this framing.

First of all, the photos exhibited much more collective than individual shots, which were meant to emphasize the Communist narrative of group solidarity, but depicted the same tropes of domesticity and maternity. Although the background of the pictures is not always clear and the spatial composition seems rather entropic (unlike the majority of Western photos, that strategically frame the individual figures or groups within the camp's surroundings), the implied liberation context – and, we now might add, the cross-referentiality with the Western canon – allows us to read them as camp images (fig. 5).

²¹ On the diversified composition and evolution of the Ravensbrück population throughout the war see Annette Leo: Ravensbrück – Stammlager. In: Wolfgang Benz / Barbara Distel (Eds.): *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*. Vol. 4: Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück. München: Beck 2006, pp. 473–520.



Fig. 5. Ukrainian mothers with their babies, who were born in the camp shortly before the liberation, May 1945. Photographer: Jirka Volejnik (presumably). [Copyright Mahn-und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte.](#)

On the one hand, this type of depiction clearly defies the trope of fragility that pervades many of the Western pictures of women in the camps, but on the other hand reinstates the stereotyped women's resilience and their capacities as nurturers to support a narrative of birth and survival instead of death and destruction. Images of mothers with their babies are not that frequent within the Western framework, which exhibits an instrumental preference for the dead mother-child couple figure, but figure 5 shows that the appropriation of the very same trope of the consoling mother can serve a wholly different political agenda. As Nira Yuval-Davis has pointed out, the female body tends to be a privileged symbol of the nation's reconstruction.²² In this case, Ukrainian mothers photographed by a Czech male point of view, the normative display of the

²² See Nira Yuval-Davis: *Gender and Nation*. London: Routledge 1997. On the gendered construction of national discourses see also Caren Kaplen et al. (Eds.): *Between Woman and Nation. Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*. Durham / London: Duke Univ. Press 1999; and Sita Ranchod-Nilsson / Mary Ann Tétreault (Eds.): *Women, States and Nationalism. At Home in the Nation?* London: Routledge 2000.

symbolical role of women as reproducers and breeders wishes to transmit a message of survival and hope for the transnational resistance cause.

Women's bodies are thus symbolically used as a medium through which the victory over fascism is conveyed. However, this picture hides a terrible truth that undermines the efficacy of its message. According to Hanka Housková, a former Czech Communist inmate who witnessed the liberation, one of the Ukrainian women was raped by a Soviet soldier. The Czech paediatrician Zdenka Nedvedova informed Major Bulander about the occurrence, who immediately ordered that the soldier should be shot. Under the sign of this truth, the depiction of the reproductive female body shifts to an image of gendered vulnerability that destabilizes the surface of representation and deconstructs the image of the liberator. The picture ends up bearing a trap to its own assigned meaning.

My next example can be said to dialogue with the previous one. Figure 6 portrays Commandant Makarov posing with a liberated girl. The trope of the soldier carrying a child is one of the most recurring rhetorical figures of war representation. The implied message is quite similar to the one represented by the nurturing mother, varying accordingly to the specific discursive economy: the heroic soldier has guaranteed the future of the nation, its own or not. Nevertheless, this trope is not very common among the Western liberation pictures, neither within the canon, nor within the archives. This has mostly to do with the staged quality of these photographs. The Allied depiction favoured an impression of authenticity and immediacy that could be easily undermined by such an artificial composition.

The picture of Commandant Makarov also exhibits a very staged quality, resounding the studio portrait tradition. The chairs are carefully placed, the background is fairly neutral, and the child is dressed up for the occasion. It almost seems anachronic or displaced in this context, and it translates a celebratory framing. In addition to the metaphor of the heroic soldier holding the future in his arms, this picture has a deeper layer of meaning. It can be read as a counter-image that attempts to deconstruct the cultural stereotype of the Russian soldier as rapist and criminal, thus responding or clashing with the first picture.



Fig. 6. Boris Sergejewitsch Makarov, first Commandant of Fürstenberg, with Lilja, one of the many liberated children, May/June 1945. Copyright Lilja Pitruschtschina (Vera Udowenko-Bobkowa Estate). Image courtesy of Mahn-und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte.

This archetype was particularly reinforced within the context of Second World War through several discursive practices²³ and the history of Ravensbrück regarding this question is still in the making.²⁴ The sex of the child in this case is crucial. A female child is culturally codified as doubly vulnerable, which accentuates the heroism and

²³ One of the most well known examples is the book *A Woman in Berlin* by Marta Hillers, an account of the period from 20 April to 22 June 1945 in Berlin that details the writer's experiences as a rape victim during the Red Army occupation of the city. The book was adapted to a movie directed by Max Färberböck in 2008, which resorts to a quite stereotypical depiction of the Russian soldier, but also sheds light on the ambivalence of the sexual encounters in the post-war period. See also Atina Grossmann: *A Question of Silence. The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers*. In: *October 72* (Spring 1995: *Berlin 1945. War and Rape „Liberators Take Liberties“*), pp. 42–63; and Norman M. Naimark: *The Russians in Germany. A History of the Soviet zone of occupation 1945–1949*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press 1996, pp. 69–140.

²⁴ See for instance Jolande Withuis: *Die verlorene Unschuld des Gedächtnisses. Soziale Amnesie in Holland und sexuelle Gewalt im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. In: Insa Eschebach et al. (Eds.): *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht* (note 7), pp. 77–96.

affability of the soldier, who in return profits, through a process of visual transference, from the image of innocence conveyed by the child. This attempt to deconstruct a cultural archetype through a familiar trope of representation would turn out to be one of the most important features of the GDR memory culture. Take, for instance, the statue of a Russian soldier holding a German girl at the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, in Berlin. Once again, under the seemingly candid and normative surface of visibility lies a broader narrative that requires a certain discursive framing to be exposed and come into view.

The individual portraits, on the other hand, are a particularly interesting feature of the liberation of Ravensbrück. Instead of depicting the anonymous victim that represents a collective or universal experience of destruction, these portraits were meant to praise well known and identified figures of the Resistance, providing a recognizable face to the Communist narrative. The rhetorical strategy is hence the same, capturing an individual figure and make it representable of a larger story, but the narrative visually sustained is, once again, a different one. My last example (fig. 7) provides a striking example.

It pictures Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, a French member of the Resistance, wife of Paul Vaillant-Couturier, one of the co-founders of the French Communist Party. Unlike the Western close shots, which usually result from a strategic articulation of foreground and background, with pained faces at the front and the camp iconography at the back, this portrait owns a seamlessly abstract and timeless quality, bolstered by its grainy aspect, and is seamlessly devoid of any Holocaust-related elements. It does nevertheless provide the perfect illustration for the words she employed in her diary to describe the experience of liberation: „Es ist wunderbar, das erste Mal seit so vielen Jahren einmal allein zu sein. Ich sehe mir den See an und den Himmel, und ich bin trunken vor Freiheit.“²⁵

²⁵ An excerpt of her diary is reproduced in Bärbel Schindler-Saefkow: *Die Befreiung des Frauen-Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück durch die Rote Armee*. In: Sigrid Jacobeit (Ed.): *„Ich grüße Euch als freier Mensch“* (note 15), p. 162.



Fig. 7. Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier in Ravensbrück before her homecoming, June 1945. Not exempt from third party's rights. [Image courtesy of Mahn-und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätte.](#)

While the first image invoked a rather normative trope of representation that overgenders the subject in favour of a broader story, this portrait allows the person depicted to figure as autonomous and assume an unconstrained heroic status, even if within a larger cause.²⁶ Nevertheless, nothing in this portrait translates the pained experience of a concentration camp, except the exhilarating sense of freedom that comes with the liberation and which the Western canon deliberately fails to reflect. Once again, the underlying narrative of survival, resistance and relief strongly depends on its contextual anchorage to simmer through, thus subverting any visual expectation raised by a canonical account of liberation.

²⁶ On the possibility of a female antifascist hero see Christa Schikorra: Die Un/Möglichkeit antifaschistischer Heldinnen. Die „Ravensbrücker Ballade“ von 1961. In: Insa Eschebach et al. (Eds.): *Gedächtnis und Geschlecht* (note 7), pp. 59–76, specially page 67: „Das Ende des Faschismus sei nicht nur von aussen, durch den Sieg insbesondere der Roten Armee erkämpft worden. Vielmehr seien die antifaschistischen Kräfte und ihre Kämpfer, die sich in den Konzentrationslagern in Gefangenschaft befanden, selbst entscheidend an der Befreiung beteiligt gewesen.“

Conclusion: the double logic of visibility

Overall, the visual record of the liberation of Ravensbrück clearly distinguishes itself from the canonical representation of the camps, not through entirely unique compositional strategies, which often coincide with the Western ones, but due to a radically divergent discursive framework. Although in the 1990s Auschwitz would become the universal symbol for the Holocaust, in 1945, for the majority of the Western public, the liberation of the camps by the Soviets was little known or understood. Despite the fact that the camp had been liberated by the Red Army, the Auschwitz iconography that has become so overwhelmingly present since the 1990s was actually constructed according to a visual code of Western liberation in order to efface any relation to the Soviet narrative.

The representation of the camps is structurally defined by an ambivalent 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 crematorium itself is no more than a mechanism to produce invisibility. The Soviet record of the liberation also lies on a regime of negotiation between visibility and invisibility. The atrocities committed in the camp were deliberately kept away from view, whilst a counter-narrative of survival and freedom came to light, proving through a counter-point that the visibility of a camp is defined both by what it allows to be visible and what it leaves out or tries to prevent from coming forth.

Gender is also a category trapped within this double logic of visibility. At times its appearance as difference is cautiously effaced, to allow a neutral narrative to brew, at other times it is strategically allowed to invade the surface of representation in its fullest shape. What type of visibility is assigned to women in Ravensbrück? How is their relation to the underlying narrative set in place? Are they visualized as heroes or rather as victims saved by heroes? Once more, difference seems indissoluble from ambivalence. While archetypes of womanhood are continuously invoked to argue the

case of a narrative larger than women themselves, a breach of visibility within the structure of discourse is sometimes up for appropriation. Herein lies the 'threshold of the visible world'.