

Lee Miller,
Photography,
Surrealism and the
Second World War

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From Vogue to Dachau

By
Lynn Hilditch

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For Alice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
War as Surreal Documentary	
Chapter One.....	21
Beauty and Duty: Wartime Fashion in <i>Vogue</i>	
Chapter Two.....	49
Wrens on Camera: Femininity in Masculine Roles	
Chapter Three	69
<i>Grim Glory</i> : Deconstructing Destruction	
Chapter Four.....	101
Framing the Holocaust: Dachau and Buchenwald	
Chapter Five	135
Poetics of Memory: War Photographs as Modern Memorials	
Chapter Six	153
Aftermath	
Bibliography.....	167
Index.....	179

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INTRODUCTION

WAR AS SURREAL DOCUMENTARY¹

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

—Antony Penrose, *The Legendary Lee Miller* (1998)¹

American-born photographer Lee Miller (1907-1977) was a polymorphic character; a chameleon who adopted a variety of personal and professional roles throughout her colourful life including *Vogue* model, Surrealist's muse, studio portraitist, war correspondent, gourmet cook, wife to the British artist and collector Roland Penrose, and mother to Antony Penrose, one of the leading researchers and champions of Miller's work. Miller's photographs were just as complex as Miller herself and often contradictory in their hybridity as Surrealism-inspired art and documentary. Miller could be described as a subtly transgressive artist—a female photographer with a Surrealist background who pushed the boundaries both of art and war photography, often using unconventional methods to comment on such multifaceted issues as sex, gender, death, and war. In her guise as war correspondent for *Vogue* magazine, and as one of a handful of female war photographers to see actual combat, Miller displayed in her photographs of the Second World War what Antony Penrose describes in the quotation cited at the beginning of this introduction as an “always present” unforced “Surrealist eye”. Her artistic vision developed to a great extent during her apprenticeship to the American Dada-Surrealist artist, photographer and filmmaker Man Ray in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Their passionate and often tempestuous relationship enabled Miller to develop her creativity and gain an extensive knowledge of Surrealist art and photography, which, in turn, helped to produce intriguing images that provide an aesthetically-shaped commentary of war. Therefore, in Miller's

¹ Antony Penrose, *The Legendary Lee Miller: Photographer 1907-1977* (Chiddingly, East Sussex, England: The Lee Miller Archives, 1998), 19.

photographs art and documentary converge, resulting in images that can be interpreted as examples of “surreal documentary”, thus supporting Steve Edwards’ belief that “the document and the art-photograph are locked together: these are mutually determining categories that draw a great deal of their meanings from the antithetical relation”.²

This book demonstrates how Miller’s Second World War photographs can be construed as visual interpretations of the world through a Surrealist sensibility—photographs in which, as Carolyn Burke describes, “[Miller’s] Surrealist imagination meets a shattered reality head-on”.³ However, the amalgamation of art and war photography is not a straightforward process, and the complexities and contradictions of combining these two seemingly diverse forms of media will be revealed through an analysis of Miller’s images. Miller’s war photographs and photo-essays, many of which were published in British and American *Vogue* during the latter years of the war, often illustrate her in-depth knowledge and experience of various art forms and art works, besides Surrealism, knowledge that she utilised to create distinctive representations of war combining subject, composition, form and text. As examples of documentary photography, Miller’s war photographs can also be positioned as cultural artefacts establishing how Miller, as well as drawing on her artistic background, was able to produce photographs that are both social and historical records of the Second World War and important examples of war art.

Of course, the term “surreal documentary” is a complex one to define. Initially intended to apply to literature and poetry, David Bate writes that Surrealism was very much “fashioned by events” and quotes André Breton who, in a talk titled “What is Surrealism?” in Brussels in 1934, declared that Surrealism had originally been characterised as “a purely intuitive epoch” between 1919-1924 but had transformed into “a reasoning epoch” from 1925-1934 in response to the events of the French colonial war against Morocco.⁴ As Breton claimed, Surrealism’s agenda had not been particularly political or social until 1925 when the outbreak of the Moroccan war (1921-1926) altered Surrealist ideology:

Surrealist activity, faced with a brutal, revolting, *unthinkable* fact, was forced to ask itself what were its proper resources and to determine their

² Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

³ Carolyn Burke, *Lee Miller* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), xiv.

⁴ David Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 2.

limits; it was forced to adopt a precise attitude, exterior to itself, in order to continue whatever exceeded these limits.⁵

It was also in 1925 in his essay “Le Surréalisme et la peinture” that Breton had initially denounced photography as a valid medium for Surrealism by declaring, “for a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist”.⁶ However, within two years, Breton had reversed his opinions demanding, “When will all the books that are worth anything stop being illustrated with drawings and appear only with photographs?” and included photographs by Jacques-André Boiffard, Brassai and Man Ray to illustrate his books *Nadja* (1928) and later *L’Amour Fou (Mad Love)* (1937).⁷ While numerous photographs were being published in journals, such as George Bataille’s Surrealist art magazine *Documents* (1929-30), Bate confirms that during the “intuitive” years “only seven photographic images were published throughout the entire series of thirty-three issues of *Littérature* from 1919 to 1924”. However, in the journals published during the “reasoning” period, *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, “visual images...and photographs in particular appear as significant contributing forms of representation within Surrealism”.⁸ Therefore, while there would seem to be an initial paradox between Surrealism (defined by Rosalind Krauss as “a revolution of values”⁹) and photography (a “plastic” art), the photograph became an essential tool “placed at Surrealism’s visual centre” both to document (as in *Nadja*) and as an indispensable part of the creative practice.¹⁰ In this respect, it could be argued that Miller’s understanding of Surrealism, developed during this second “reasoning epoch”, was shaped because of this change in artistic attitude, which consequently shaped her photography during the war.

As examples of surreal documentary, Miller’s war photographs can be analysed within the context of Breton’s fundamental principles of Surrealism

⁵ André Breton, “What is Surrealism?” trans. and published in English in 1936 (Faber and Faber) by David Gascoyne and reprinted in Franklin Rosemont (ed.), *What is Surrealism?* (London: Pluto, 1989), 116-117.

⁶ André Breton, “Le Surréalisme et la peinture”, *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 4, July 1925, 28. In André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 32.

⁷ Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, 32.

⁸ Bate, 5.

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Photography in the Service of Surrealism”, in Krauss and Livingston, *L’Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York and London: Abbeville Press, 1985), 15.

¹⁰ Krauss and Livingston, *L’Amour Fou*, 9.

that were initially introduced during the reasoning epoch—namely the “marvellous” and “convulsive beauty”. The “marvellous” is a term Hal Foster describes as “the concept that superseded automatism as the basic principle of Bretonian Surrealism. Advanced by Breton, the marvellous has two cognates: convulsive beauty and objective chance, the first announced in *Nadja*, the second developed in *Les Vases Communicants* (1932), and both refined in *L’Amour Fou*”.¹¹ According to the Surrealist poet and writer Louis Aragon, the marvellous:

...opposes what exists mechanically, what *is* so much it isn’t noticed any more, and so it is commonly believed [to be] the negation of reality. This rather summary idea is conditionally acceptable. It is certain the marvellous is born of the refusal of *one* reality, but also of the development of a new relationship, of a new reality this refusal has liberated.¹²

Therefore, the marvellous can be interpreted as a play on opposites—transforming the mundane of the everyday into something otherworldly, dreamlike, surreal, *marvellous*. As Alfred Barr Jr, director and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1929-1943, declared in his monumental 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, Surrealism is “the contemporary movement towards an art of the marvellous and irrational”.¹³ As one of the main instigators of the Surrealist movement, Breton had originally suggested in *Nadja*, “Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all,”¹⁴ and in *L’Amour Fou* (1937), Breton continued to develop his idea of convulsive beauty by describing it as “veiled-erotic [*erotique-voilée*], fixed-explosive [*explosante-fixe*], magic-circumstantial [*magique-circonstancielle*], or it will not be”.¹⁵ While Hugh Davis argues that Breton appears to provide only “a concept [of convulsive beauty] through images rather than a precise definition”, he acknowledges that in *L’Amour Fou* Breton does seem to offer further clues in an attempt to define the term:

¹¹ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), 19.

¹² Louis Aragon quoted in J. H. Matthews, *Surrealist Poetry in France* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 41.

¹³ Alfred Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937), 13.

¹⁴ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 160.

¹⁵ André Breton, *Mad Love [L’Amour Fou]*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 19.

...through examples of natural mimicry, including a limestone deposit that looks like ‘an egg in an eggcup’ and a coral reef that resembles a garden. What these examples have in common is that they are both animate and inanimate; blurring the distinction between life and death, they dissolve the boundaries, as sign (garden) displaces referent (coral), between the imaginary and the real.¹⁶

David Hopkins adds that while “‘veiled-erotic’...arose from the merging of the animate and inanimate” and “‘fixed-explosive’...came about when motion was translated into repose (as in a photograph of a locomotive overgrown with vegetation)”, “‘magical-circumstantial’...arose from a ‘magical encounter’ with a seemingly portentous phrase or object”, which relates to the practice of chance that was used as a creative tool by the Surrealists and the Dadaists before them.¹⁷ Bate further explains that these categories, “developed from classifications of hysterical attack by Jean Charcot and Pierre Janet, belong to a revised theory of the Surrealist poetic act. Hysteria by itself is no longer enough as a Surrealist gesture and it is modified through Breton’s reading of the Freudian concept of ‘lost object’”.¹⁸ Building on his idea of the lost (and love) object, Breton proposed the *objet trouvé*, or “found object”, as another fundamental component of Surrealist practice, as discussed in further detail below.

Antony Penrose’s quotation, used as an epigraph at the beginning of this introduction, acknowledges that Miller’s “Surrealist eye was always present”, and thus recognises Miller’s Surrealist vision, the way she viewed the world, and how this vision was reciprocated throughout her war photographs. In many of Miller’s war photographs, the disturbing nature of the subject or object is interpreted as examples of convulsive beauty or the marvellous when considering how Miller used creative composition and form to transform the subject into an artistic representation of the horrors of war. It is true that Miller had already been taught by her mentor Man Ray “that every object and every person is beautiful, and that the artist’s job is to find the moment, the angle, or the surroundings that reveal that beauty”, no matter how terrible the environment.¹⁹ Drawing upon an idea of incorporating objective chance and the *objet trouvé*—the Surrealist practice of discovering, often subconsciously, an intriguing object and

¹⁶ Hugh Davis, *The Making of James Agee* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 116.

¹⁷ David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66-67.

¹⁸ Bate, 245.

¹⁹ Lee Miller, “I Worked with Man Ray”, *Lilliput*, October 1945.

transforming it into an artistic subject—Miller applies this practice in her photographs to create a bizarre and often ironically amusing world filled with fallen statues and broken typewriters (see chapter three). For example, in some cases, the effects of enemy fire, particularly during the London Blitz, had created a specific form or isolated an object, which was then captured by Miller as a photographic subject; a piece of Surrealism-inspired war sculpture emerging from the rubble. The location of the *objet trouvé* is closely related to the use of chance in the artistic process. As the British photographer Humphrey Spender once commented on his own pre-war work:

I was trying to be very objective and accepted Surrealist elements when and where they cropped up, rather than consciously avoiding pressures to seek out such elements. To say that Surrealist elements were particularly evident in Mass Observation's findings would be simply to say that such elements abound in everyday life, since my function was to document everyday life.²⁰

Spender adds that he “did not go around searching out such subjects” but with his understanding of Surrealism, he was “very aware that they would turn up”.²¹ However, there was a distinct difference between the use of chance as a Surrealist and as a Dadaist principle. As Roger Cardinal and Robert Stuart Short noted in their 1970 book *Surrealism: Permanent Revelation*, “The Surrealists’ appeal to chance and spontaneity was made in a different spirit from that of the Dadaists; they intended not so much to deride and to ridicule artistic pretension, as to call up visions of a new order behind the fragmentation and confusion that were everywhere so evident”.²² With this idea in mind, two forms of chance, as suggested by Breton in *L’Amour Fou*, can be considered in relation to Miller’s war photographs: “determined chance” and “accidental (or coincidental) chance”. In relation to chance, the marvellous, and the *objet trouvé*, Breton writes, “...what is delightful ...is the dissimilarity itself which exists between the object wished for and *the object found*. This *trouvaille*, whether it be artistic, scientific, philosophic, or as useless as anything, is

²⁰ Humphrey Spender quoted in Ian Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 118.

²¹ Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, 118.

²² Roger Cardinal and Robert Stuart Short, *Surrealism: Permanent Revelation* (London: Studio Vista, 1970), 17-18. Cardinal and Short also note that while the Surrealists took advantage of Dadaist methods and ideologies for a few years, they soon moved on in their own direction. Cardinal and Short, 18.

enough to undo the beauty of everything beside it. In it alone can we recognise the marvellous precipitate of desire”.²³

Harriett Watts argues that it is essential “a distinction [is] made between chance, or accident, as subject matter, and chance as compositional principle” to establish what is meant by chance in art, what the relationship was between chance and Surrealism, and, in turn, how this principle can be specifically applied to Miller’s war photography.²⁴ As a major principle of Surrealism, chance was commonly used to determine the composition or form of a piece of work. Breton describes chance in the words of French mathematician Jules Henri Poincaré as an “event rigorously determined, but such that an extremely small difference in its causes would have produced a considerable difference in the facts”.²⁵ Therefore, “determined chance” suggests an element of awareness by the artist of chance’s role in composition by using chance to select or assemble objects usually already pre-selected by the artist, and there is substantial evidence of Miller’s creative incorporation of determined chance and use of *objets trouvés* throughout her war photographs, especially those published in *Grim Glory*. For example, in *Indecent Exposure* (1940) it appears that Miller has already found the objects (the mannequins) by chance that are then reassembled into a humorous scene of war by the photographer (see chapter three, fig. 3-5). Watts writes that artists such as Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso and George Braque believed that the most humble of objects were worthy of inclusion in a work of art, “and this respect for humble things was reserved by the Futurists and later by the Dadaists”.²⁶ Breton describes how the flea market played a central role in the process of finding *objets trouvés* in both *L’Amour Fou* and *Nadja* writing, “I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse...”.²⁷ Ian Walker confirms how the flea market—along with the Zone and the abattoir—“became important Surrealist sites for estrangement and entropy”, and for magical chance encounters with the bizarre.²⁸ The French poet, writer, artist, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau commented upon Picasso’s habit of scavenging pieces of junk, which he

²³ Breton, *Mad Love*, 14-15.

²⁴ Harriett Watts, *Chance: A Perspective on Dada* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 1.

²⁵ Breton, *Mad Love*, 23.

²⁶ Watts, 13.

²⁷ Breton, *Nadja*, 52.

²⁸ Ian Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 126.

would later utilise in his work. He noted, “Whatever he does, Picasso harvests. He is a rag picker of genius: King of the rag pickers. As soon as he goes out he gathers up all that he finds and brings it back to his studio, where he raises it, no matter what it is, to the dignity of use”.²⁹ This attitude towards the object as subject and the use of chance composition resulted in Picasso’s invention of the collage in 1912 with his painting *Still Life with Chair Caning*. Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and others later adopted his method during the 1910s. Miller herself became the subject of one of Surrealist Joseph Cornell’s collages produced in the late 1940s, and even created the occasional collage herself, such as her portrait of the artists Eileen Agar and Dora Maar produced in 1937. According to Belinda Rathbone, Walker Evans believed that “trash was the contemporary equivalent of ruin”,³⁰ and Henri Cartier-Bresson declared, “It is to Surrealism that I owe allegiance, for it has taught me to allow the camera lens to rummage in the debris of the unconscious and of chance”.³¹ Therefore, throughout her Second World War photographs, there is evidence, particularly in her *Grim Glory* photographs, to show that Miller at least applied the *method* of collage, if not the *practice*, to her war work in the identification and utilisation of objects found amongst the ruins.

“Accidental (or coincidental) chance”, the other classification suggested by Breton, occurs when an artistic situation or composition is established in circumstances completely out of the artist’s control, sometimes with an element of surprise or chaos. Breton defines “chance” itself as a concept, in the words of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, as “an accidental cause of exceptional or accessory effects taking on the appearance of finality” and, according to French economist Antoine Augustin Cournot, as “an event brought about by the combination or the encounter of phenomena which belong to independent series in the order of causality”.³² One example of accidental chance is Miller’s so-called “rediscovery” of the “Solarisation technique” (also referred to as the Sabatier Effect) in Man Ray’s darkroom in 1929 when something, supposedly a mouse, ran across her foot in the dark, forcing her instinctively to switch on the light. Solarisation is the creative process produced by the extreme over-exposure of the negative during the development process. The shadow areas are the most affected, developing to a greater density than the original negative image, resulting

²⁹ Jean Cocteau quoted in Watts, 12.

³⁰ Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 255.

³¹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, *André Breton: Roi Soleil* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1995), unpaginated.

³² Breton, *Mad Love*, 23.

in the appearance of a dark line around the subject giving the image a painterly effect. This distinctive technique became something of a joint visual signature of Miller and Man Ray, arguably as recognisable as Man Ray's Rayographs, and included Man Ray's solarised portrait of Miller taken in Paris circa 1930, and Miller's portraits of fellow Surrealist Meret Oppenheim (1930), Miller's friend Dorothy Hill (1933), and the silent film star Lilian Harvey (1933).³³ Another female portraitist, Helen Muspratt, who along with Lettice Ramsay ran the Ramsay and Muspratt Portrait studio in Cambridge, England, was also working with the solarisation technique during the 1930s after it had been "brought to Britain on a wave of European innovation", probably following Miller and Man Ray's resurrection of the process. Mark Haworth-Booth describes solarisation as "a perfect Surrealist medium in which positive and negative occur simultaneously, as if in a dream".³⁴ Therefore, Miller's use of solarisation is not only the result of integrating chance into artistic practice; it also conforms to the marvellous by bringing together two parallel opposites—positive and negative—so that they occur simultaneously to create a dreamlike vision of reality.

By interpreting a scene through a Surrealist eye and by incorporating Breton's theories, beauty can project both pleasure and pain simultaneously, and Miller demonstrates this philosophy in her war photographs, especially her images of Dachau and Buchenwald as discussed in chapter four. Therefore, considered within a Surrealist context, Miller's images of the concentration camps illustrate how a subject-object, whether it be a pile of charred remains, a beaten SS guard or the corpses of dead prisoners, can assume a certain distorted beauty. Thus, Miller's photographs contradict the beliefs of scholars, such as Theodor Adorno, Elie Wiesel, and Saul Friedlander, who "warned against the aestheticising dimensions of Holocaust representation, its problematic proximity to visual pleasure, and its immortality in the face of atrocity".³⁵ Although Miller used her photographs to document the atrocities of war, her incorporation of Breton's theories demonstrate how war can also be

³³ Val Williams and Susan Bright, "New Freedoms in Photography" in *How We Are: Photographing Britain – From the 1840s to the Present* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 82.

³⁴ Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Art of Lee Miller* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 30.

³⁵ Carol Zemel, "Emblems of Atrocity: Holocaust Liberation Photographs", in Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz, eds. *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 205.

interpreted as war art, and modern memorials, like Breton's "photograph of the speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest".³⁶ In Miller's photographs of the concentration camps, therefore, there is a distinct relationship between the revulsion of the subject and the way that Miller has aesthetically composed the subject to give the image a sense of beauty, thus hybridising Surrealist art and documentary. As Breton writes, "convulsive beauty must respond to the deepest sense of the term...such beauty cannot appear except from the poignant feeling of the thing revealed, the integral certainty produced by the emergence of a solution, which, by its very nature, could not come to us along ordinary paths".³⁷ Certainly, the results of the Blitz bombings and the persecution of thousands of innocent victims in the concentrations camps did not come to Miller "along ordinary paths".

As with Surrealism, the term "documentary" is also in itself challenging and difficult to apply due to its generic nature. Edwards notes that documentary is "an incredibly elastic category—perhaps even more so than 'document'—which is frequently used to describe war photography, photojournalism, forms of social investigation, and more open-ended projects of observation"³⁸; and Walker writes, "I use the term 'documentary' in ways that have become more common in recent years, as a genre that is broader and more ambiguous than has often been acknowledged in the past".³⁹ Tanya Barson agrees that documentary is certainly far from straightforward and its influence on visual culture has been "complex and multifaceted".⁴⁰ Likewise, Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes "to speak of documentary photography either as a discrete form of photographic practice or, alternatively, as an identifiable corpus of work is to run headlong into a morass of contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity".⁴¹ Therefore, for the purpose of this book the term "documentary" will be used in relation to the *process* of creating the record-photograph, for example, in the actual producing and presenting of the final product, whereas the terms "document" or "documentation" will be used in

³⁶ Breton, *Mad Love*, 10.

³⁷ Breton, *Mad Love*, 13.

³⁸ Edwards, 26.

³⁹ Walker, *So Exotic, So Homemade*, 8.

⁴⁰ Tanya Barson, "Time Present and Time Past" in *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now* (Liverpool: Tate, 2006), 25.

⁴¹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 169.

reference to the *product*, for example, the historical record, such as a war photograph or an official wartime publication.

Solomon-Godeau believes that the “retrospective construction of the documentary mode” traditionally begins with the Danish-born reformist Jacob Riis in the 1880s and particularly demonstrated in his work *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), a documentation of immigrants and social life in New York City.⁴² Barson, however, claims that it was the influential British director, producer and writer John Grierson who first established the use of the term “documentary” as a film movement in the 1930s and, subsequently, was the first to provide a definition and theory of documentary. Grierson believed that the realist nature of documentary film was having the ability to creatively interpret “actuality”—“the world of the streets, of the tenements and the factories, the living people and observation of living people”—more truthfully and explicitly than the artificiality of the movies.⁴³ Barson adds that through the Griersonian method of filmmaking, “Britain played a central role in the development of documentary; from the beginning artists were involved and made crucial contributions. In turn, documentary practitioners have influenced artists. The traditional opposition between art and documentary can therefore be considered a false dichotomy”.⁴⁴ British Surrealist filmmaker, artist and poet Humphrey Jennings, who had worked for Grierson at the General Post Office Film Unit in the mid-1930s, produced a collection of wartime documentaries that prompted film director Lindsay Anderson to describe him as “the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced”.⁴⁵ Jennings’ poetic vision of the British nation at war, documented in films such as *London Can Take It!* (1940), *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) (fig. 1), is effectively captured in *I See London*, a series of poems written in 1941 that draw clear comparisons with Miller’s photographs of the London Blitz:

I see a thousand strange sights in the streets of London
 I see the clock on Bow Church burning in daytime
 I see a one-legged man crossing the fire on crutches
 I see three negroes and a woman with white face-powder reading music at
 half-past three in the morning

⁴² Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 173.

⁴³ Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 76.

⁴⁴ Barson, 9.

⁴⁵ Lindsay Anderson, “Only Connect: some aspects on the work of Humphrey Jennings”, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 4, June 1952, 181.

I see an ambulance girl with her arms full of roses
 I see the burnt drums of the Philharmonic
 I see the green leaves of Lincolnshire carried through London on the
 wrecked body of an aircraft⁴⁶



Fig. 1: Still from *Fires Were Started*. Dir. Humphrey Jennings. Crown Film Unit, 1943.

Jennings' "one-legged man" also made an appearance in his 1943 docudrama *Fires Were Started* (fig. 1). In terms of surreal documentary, Jennings (through poetry and film) and Miller (through photography) described and depicted very similar artistic visions of a city at war. Peter Stansky and William Abrahams describe Jennings as "a clear-cut instance of an artist brought into being and fulfilment by the war", a quote which could just as easily be applied to Miller who was also driven by the excitement of war and its countless photographic opportunities it brought with it.⁴⁷

American photographer Dorothea Lange provided a definition of the term 'documentary' in relation to documentary photography specifically. She writes:

Documentary photography records the social scene of our time. It mirrors the present and documents for the future. Its focus is man and his relation to mankind. It records his customs at work, at war, at play, or his round of activities through twenty-four hours of the day, the cycle of the seasons, or the span of a life...Documentary photography stands on its own merits and

⁴⁶ Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *London's Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), 101.

⁴⁷ Stansky and Abrahams, 71.

has validity by itself. A single photographic print may be ‘news,’ a ‘portrait,’ ‘art,’ or ‘documentary’—any of these, all of them, or none.⁴⁸

Lange was essentially a documentary photographer in the sense that her work aimed to produce what Walker Evans referred to as “records” or “straight documentation”⁴⁹—historical records of the American Depression without foregrounding aesthetic composition or content. However, as Lange acknowledges, a photograph does not have to be strictly placed within just one genre and may be a combination of art and documentary, as can be seen throughout the work of photographers with artistic backgrounds such as Evans, whose aim was to photograph “the moral and aesthetic texture of the Depression”,⁵⁰ and Cartier-Bresson who commented that “photography is not documentary, but intuition, a poetic experience”.⁵¹ As Edwards writes:

Many key documentary photographers—including Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Humphrey Spender, Brassai, and André Kertész—thought of their work as a new kind of poetry. In this manner, much documentary photography combined a campaigning vision with an aesthetic of the everyday. In part, at least, this conception stems from the emergence of documentary photography alongside Surrealism. Documentary photographers were interested in finding the extraordinary in ordinary life. Rather than high-flown subjects, the vision focused on the way shadows fall on empty coffee cups, life on the streets of the modern city, or the oddities associated with popular leisure.⁵²

Miller’s Blitz photographs certainly portray “an aesthetic of the everyday” through her interest in “finding the extraordinary in ordinary life”. However, the Blitz was not an everyday nor an ordinary experience so Miller focused on seeking out the “oddities” or *surrealities* of war rather than of popular leisure. Like Miller, some documentary photographers purposely (and perhaps, naturally) set out to combine an artistic approach with an ability to create records of the times. Bill Brandt and Cecil Beaton, for example, also produced Surrealism-inspired photographs of the Blitz,

⁴⁸ Dorothea Lange quoted in Karin Becker Ohrn, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 37.

⁴⁹ Rathbone, 57-58.

⁵⁰ Walker Evans quoted in Rathbone, 2.

⁵¹ Henri Cartier-Bresson, “Collector’s Issue: Henri Cartier-Bresson”, *American Photo*, September/October 1997, 96.

⁵² Edwards, 34.

George Rodgers photographed Bergen-Belsen with an artistic eye, and Walker Evans created street photography that incorporated random found objects and surreal viewpoints. Indeed, some of Evans' photographs are comparable to Miller's own photographs taken in Paris during the late 1920s and early 1930s as well as her photographs of the Blitz.

In comparison with Lange's Farm Security Administration documentary photographs from the Depression era, Miller's war photographs have become important in their role as "modern memorials" by mirroring the past and documenting for the future (see chapter five). However, while Miller was often guilty of manipulating a scene for propaganda purposes (the photographs of Miller and David E. Scherman bathing in Hitler's bath tub, for example), as many of the photographers working for Roy Stryker's organisation (including Evans) did, Miller used Surrealism to take her documentary photography to another level. Like Cartier-Bresson, Beaton and Evans, Miller's photographs are clever and witty—she expects more from the viewer and acknowledges the viewer's intelligence. What makes Miller distinctive and different from many of her contemporaries, however, is that she was a female photographer working within two essentially male environments—Surrealism and war photography—and confronting the challenges and restrictions placed upon women working within those fields at that time.

In developing the argument that Miller's photographs are challenging examples of surreal documentary, this book will explore the contradictory nature of Miller's work and how her war photographs often contain paradoxes and juxtapositions of the real and the surreal (by analysing how Miller documents the realities of war while at the same time approaching them from a surreal point of view), the masculine and the feminine (by exploring Miller's visual representation and often subversive interpretation of gender roles in war), and the aesthetic and the documentary (by analysing Miller's reportage of the war and her artistic interpretation of scenes of war, particularly of the Blitz and the concentration camps). Dabney Townsend argues that there are many types of definitions for aesthetics, all of which "assume that works of art and aesthetic experiences are the kinds of things that have some essential set of features".⁵³ He writes:

In aesthetics, the search for definitions begins with essentialist assumptions – i.e. that the use of 'work of art' requires some essential

⁵³ Dabney Townsend, *An Introduction to Aesthetics* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 47.

characteristic or property. Essentialist assumptions are challenged in contemporary aesthetics, and it is questioned whether aesthetic theory is possible at all. Perhaps we only have a range of practices.⁵⁴

While acknowledging the complexities involved in defining what the practice or understanding of aesthetics is, in relation to Miller's war photographs the term will be applied to an object, subject or scene that is deemed, or may be deemed, beautiful or artistic, and is related to the philosophy of aesthetics, the study of the rules and principles of art. This definition supports Breton's theory of convulsive beauty and his notion that *any* subject, no matter how horrifying, may be interpreted as art. In relation to Miller's work, this book discusses her ability to take a subject or object, such as the bombed interior of Cologne cathedral, a napalm attack on the fortress at St Malo, or the remains of a Broadwood piano emerging from a pile of rubble, and interpret it as a piece of art, an *objet trouvé* or a piece of war sculpture. Similarly, Miller's use of creative composition in her photographs of the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald allows her to construct an image with artistic form despite the obvious rawness of the subject. As Breton writes in *Le Second Manifeste du surréalisme* in 1930:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point in the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point.⁵⁵

In other words, as a photographer-artist first and a documentarian-war correspondent second, Miller could take these opposites, these contradictions, and merge them into surreal documentary by using her understanding of Bretonian Surrealism and other artistic conventions, thus proving that it was indeed possible for two seemingly opposing extremes to be synthesised. In his earlier *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924), André Breton provided a technical definition borrowed from his contemporary, Pierre Reverdy, who wrote in the March 1918 edition of the monthly literary review, *Nord-Sud*, "The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born out of a mere comparison but only through the bringing

⁵⁴ Townsend, 52.

⁵⁵ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. H.R. Lane and R. Seaver (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), 123-124.

together, the juxtaposition, of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be – the greater its emotional power and poetic reality”.⁵⁶ This description is certainly applicable to Miller’s photographs of Dachau and Buchenwald where art and reportage are juxtaposed to produce images with both emotive and aesthetic qualities.

The chapters of this book examine Miller’s photographic career in a generally chronological order. Chapter one, “Beauty and Duty - Wartime Fashion in *Vogue*” focuses on Miller’s photographs of women in fashion during the early years of the war with reference to her photographic collocation of glamour and war and the relationship between the seemingly opposing genres of fashion photography and war photography. The female gaze and the paradoxical ideologies of “woman as viewer” and “woman as subject” will be discussed along with Miller’s ability to move with the advances in technology during the mid-twentieth-century that permitted the photographer (and model) to break away from the restrictions of the photographic studio. This chapter will also consider the role of *Vogue* magazine during the war and its acceptance of war-related photojournalism alongside its traditional fashion features. Miller’s experience of working as a model and fashion photographer at *Vogue* helped her to develop a unique vision that juxtaposed a honed eye for art and fashion with a duty to inform from the battlefield. As Becky E. Conekin affirms, Miller often “broke down barriers between fashion and war reportage. Her wartime pieces overflow with rich descriptions of her sensual impressions of the scenes of war around her—sounds, smells, and especially sights. Those scenes, as well as the details of clothing, bodies, and hair, were frequently described in terms of high art”.⁵⁷

In contrast to the fashion photographs, the second chapter, “Wrens on Camera – Femininity in Masculine Roles”, investigates how Miller’s knowledge of fashion photography and art is applied in her documentation of women in war through an analysis of photographs published in *Vogue* photo-essays including “Night Life Now”, British *Vogue*, June 1943, and “Unarmed Warriors”, British *Vogue*, September 1944. In addition, this chapter will focus on several images from her book *Wrens in Camera* (1945), commissioned by the Women’s Royal Naval Service. To advance an idea originally suggested by Carol Squiers in *The Critical Image* (1994), Miller’s photographs will be examined from a gender perspective

⁵⁶ Paul Reverdy, *Nord-Sud*, Literature Review, no. 13, March 1918, 3.

⁵⁷ Becky E. Conekin, *Lee Miller in Fashion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 139.

by exploring whether the women depicted in Miller's images, and indeed Miller herself, were forced to temporarily discard an element of their femininity—to “de-gender”, “de-layer” or even “masculinise”—to succeed, and survive, within the predominantly masculine sphere of war. This chapter demonstrates that through her photographs, Miller first recognises and then interprets women's unique yet essential contributions to the war effort even though the social roles of women directly after the war were very much in doubt.

Chapter three, “*Grim Glory* - Deconstructing Destruction”, explores Miller's artistic photographic depiction of the destructive nature of war by focusing on a selection of images taken in London during the Blitz of 1940. Twenty-two photographs by Miller were published in the Ministry of Information commissioned booklet *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*, edited by Ernestine Carter. Emphasis will be placed on the photographs' semiotic and symbolic content, particularly in relation to the Surrealist content that will be discussed in detail with reference to the utilisation of chance, *humour noir* and the *objet trouvé* as part of the creative process. For example, Miller discovered objects amongst the rubble and subsequently photographed them as a form of war art, thus transforming them from useless objects into pieces of sculpture. The socio-historical and cultural significance of the destroyed objects/subjects is also considered. Finally, this chapter develops the idea of surreal documentary by demonstrating how scenes of ruin can be interpreted as aesthetically significant and within the context of Bretonian Surrealism.

Chapter four, “Framing the Holocaust – Dachau and Buchenwald”, looks specifically at Miller's concentration camp photographs taken following the camps' liberation in April 1945. This chapter will explore the difficulties in reporting and recording scenes of horror and how Miller's photographs not only document and provide crucial evidence of one of the most horrific episodes in twentieth-century history, but also depict scenes that have become aestheticised through Miller's creative use of composition and form, and through her knowledge and experience of various art works and movements, besides Surrealism. Close analysis of her images of the victims of war establishes how Miller's evocative and often emotive images of atrocity can be compared to, and were often inspired by, other examples of war art not only produced by the Surrealists, but by artists and art works dating back to the Renaissance period and earlier, such as the work of Hieronymus Bosch, Raphael Santi and Pieter Bruegel. The argument that Miller incorporates Breton's theory of convulsive beauty is further developed through the analysis of her Dachau and Buchenwald photographs to demonstrate how even her most

explicit and gruesome images of war can be interpreted as beautiful, or “marvelous”, when analysed as surreal documentary.

Chapter five, “Poetics of Memory – War Photographs as Modern Memorials”, discusses how Miller’s war photographs can be interpreted as “modern memorials” and elaborates to explore the role of selected images as visual reminders of the potentially destructive nature of humanity. This chapter will explore how Miller’s images not only have great worth as historical documents, but also give expression to testimony, experience and memory of the Second World War. Miller’s photographs can be read in line with the classic theories of John Berger, Julia Kristeva and Susan Sontag regarding the visual representation of conflict to explore how photographers, like Miller, were able to use their medium and artistic skills to effectively reconstruct the horror of war as a form of “modern memorial” for future generations. However, this chapter will also draw upon more contemporary ideas on the role of the war photograph as a fundamental part of the memorialisation process by considering the work of writers such as Jay Winter, Marianne Hirsch, Barbie Zelizer and Jean Gallagher. As Jay Prosser writes with reference to Sontag’s writing, “photography remains the most momentous and memorable way of conveying the ‘pain of others’”.⁵⁸

Finally, “Aftermath” concludes the book by discussing how Miller’s creative approach towards her documentation of the Second World War has produced a collection of photographs in which Miller becomes an angry witness to the consequential effects of the Nazi regime as well as a photographer whose knowledge and incorporation of art has produced a unique perspective on the horror and destruction of war. For example, her dramatic photographs of the exploding bombs on the citadel at St Malo; her documentation of Hitler’s residence, The Berghof, in flames, an event that signified the fall of the Third Reich; and, perhaps the most intriguing of all the images and one that illustrates the successful Lee Miller-David E. Scherman partnership, Scherman’s portrait of Miller sitting in Hitler’s bathtub taken a day after the liberation of Dachau, will all be considered as significant photographs in her war oeuvre. The image of Miller in Hitler’s bath, for example, stands as a key image not only because it epitomises this book’s central argument that Miller’s war photographs can be interpreted as surreal documentary. It also signifies the importance of Miller as a successful and influential war photographer, and one who extends the scope of war photography’s subject matter by exploring the

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller and Jay Prosser (eds.), *Photographing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 8.

issues surrounding the relationship between the war photograph's function as an historical document and its meaning as a work of art.

Analysis of Miller's photographs in the above six chapters illustrates how Miller—a female war correspondent who had worked with the Surrealists—was able to use her knowledge and understanding of art and creative practice to bring together the concepts of the artistic (Surrealism) and the documentary (historical record) to produce intriguing images of war, thus establishing Miller as one of the most important female war photographers of the twentieth-century.

