

## BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

### **Ways of Thinking (ADDA 4022)**

*Essay: De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to the politics of representation from the perspective of gender studies, the postcolonial condition or the visualisation of violence.*

Word count: 1558 plus bibliography



FIGURE 1

*Corpse of mother at Bergen-Belsen, April 17, 1945* The Imperial War Museum, London



FIGURE 2

*Horrors of a Concentration Camp, 1945 Lee Miller Archives*



FIGURE 3

*AKT (Nude), Egon Schiele, 1917*

In this essay I will deconstruct the meaning of an image, a photograph of a woman who died in Bergen-Belsen Nazi concentration camp at the close of the Second World War, examining its constituent elements to better understand its meaning as a culturally produced visual artefact. Deconstruction and analysis will be from the perspective of visualisation of violence and the politics of representation, using the commonly accepted definition of violence as 'behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill' and paying attention to issues of both gender and Jewish identity.

Regardless of intention, all photographs are constructed artefacts and the 'truth' of any subject depicted is mediated and framed through the point of view of a photographer. As Vilem Flusser asserts, in capturing an image a photographer is 'looking for the position that best corresponds to his intention to fix a changing situation.' (2014, p. 75). Susan Sontag describes photographs of war and its victims as a 'species of rhetoric', persuasive and simplified, which aim to 'create the illusion of consensus.', (2004, p. 3). She discusses how the same image can be, in reality, interpreted very differently depending upon one's 'side' in a conflict and its socio-political context (2004, pp. 5-7). Despite a history of falsification and manipulation tracing back to the Crimean War in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sontag argues that war photographs are historically perceived as objective records of fact, particularly when 'without the taint of artistry' (2004, p. 21). The utilitarian images made by military personnel in the concentration camps were perceived as more 'valid' documents than the more carefully composed and lit work of well-known photographers including Lee Miller (2004, p. 66), Figure 2.

The photograph I have chosen is a grainy black and white image of an unnamed woman taken by an unnamed member of the all-male Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU). The AFPU was formed by the British Army in 1941 to provide battle records and counteract enemy propaganda (Gladstone, 2002, p. 324). AFPU combat photographers, some of whom were Jewish (Imperial War Museum, n.d.), were present for the liberation of Bergen-Belsen on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1945 and spent the following two weeks recording conditions at the camp in still and moving images. This photograph was taken on the second day and shows the corpse of a young woman, dark haired, light skinned, supine, partially naked, emaciated, eyes and mouth slightly open. We can speculate that she was statistically likely to be Jewish, based on Nazi records of camp inmates, but she might have been Roma, Sinti or imprisoned for a physical or intellectual disability.

Regarding the choices made by the photographer, according to Hannah Caven (2001, p. 223) no specific orders were given by the British Army or Government and individual cameramen made their own decisions about creating a representative record of a changing situation, quickly and with a finite amount of film. Meticulous notes known as 'dope sheets' explained the content of each picture on each roll of film and care was taken to record the names and nationality of subjects where possible and frequently whether they were Jewish. Clearly

attempts were made to document events faithfully in exceptionally challenging circumstances and AFPU photographs were admitted as evidence in the Nuremburg trials of Nazi war criminals (Caven, 2001, p. 225).

This woman in this photograph was one of at least 10,000 unburied corpses within Bergen-Belsen camp at the time of liberation and corpses were routinely stripped so that clothing could be re-used, therefore it can be argued that it is a realistic representation of a particular circumstance. However, Sontag asserts that 'With our dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face.' (2004, p. 61) and this image is shocking in its almost complete frontal nudity. She continues that from a European or American perspective we are more likely to see frontal views of the dead from 'remote' or 'exotic' places in Africa or Asia. It must be observed that in composition the photograph bears a grotesque resemblance to the conventions of nude female representation with the woman's body displayed supine toward the viewer (Berger, 1972, p. 55). As a viewer I find this intersection, with its connotations of male gaze objectification, deeply disturbing as it compounds the dehumanising horror of the victim's death. It particularly suggests the work of Egon Sheile (Figure 2).

Barbie Zelizer describes how 'the documentation of women's experience in the camps was ... shaped to fit dominant cultural assumptions about women in culture and society.' (2000, p. 255). She shows how liberation imagery stressed women's vulnerability and fragility and was used symbolically and non-referentially in the media to illustrate a larger narrative of Nazi barbarity (2000, p. 250). Zelizer addresses the particular image examined in this essay, explaining how it was not published at the time even though the corresponding photograph of the woman's dead children appeared in the British press. She suggests that the woman's beauty and potential erotic quality 'undermined the larger story of atrocity, which could accommodate depictions of her only as the victim of brutality' (2000, p. 257) recalling Sontag's description of war photography as simplified rhetoric (see above).

While the atrocity images were met with public horror and shock, there was also anger when it emerged that the government had suppressed the extent of its knowledge of the concentration camps. It had also deliberately limited the release of information on the extent of Nazi persecution of Jews (Caven, 2001, p. 229). Most news media aligned with the Ministry of Information and the Foreign Office, making little specific reference to Jews in coverage of the liberation even when the Jewish identity of subjects had been specifically recorded by cameramen (2001, p. 225 & 239). Debate about whether atrocity images were appropriate viewing for children or adults was widespread but photography and film from the camps dominated print media and newsreels. This was almost overwhelmingly accepted by the public as authentic at the time (2001, p. 244) but claims about the fabrication of concentration camp images have since become a staple of Holocaust denial, especially as the Alt Right has gained political traction.

Susie Linfield weighs the ethics of looking at photographs of the Holocaust and quotes Janina Struk in asking us to 'Consider if you would want your last moments of a degrading and unimaginably cruel death to be flaunted world wide' (Linfield, 2010, p. 95) and this reflects my moral response to the photograph I have chosen to deconstruct. However Linfield concludes that as so many victims themselves made extraordinary efforts to record and communicate their plight, and survivors continued to do so after liberation, we owe them our attention (2010, p. 99). Sontag goes further, stating that choosing ignorance is a 'kind of moral defectiveness,' and the images are necessary to inform us that 'This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.' (2004, p. 100). Sontag and Linfield have both moved me with their reasoning.

Sontag highlights the role of context, comparing the experience of contemplative viewing of concentration camp photographs in a museum with the sense of exploitation when photographs of human suffering are displayed in an art gallery or even used in advertising. Institutions such as the Imperial War Museum are careful to contextualise atrocity images in ways which humanise and individualise the victims rather than present them as a homogenised mass of victims, for example including stories of ordinary Jewish family life within its Holocaust galleries (Imperial War Museums, 2021). Worryingly, the importance and difficulty of controlling context has escalated rapidly with digital technology and social media facilitating the dissemination and potential manipulation and misuse of images. I anticipate that this will be exacerbated by the democratisation of AI. I would argue that these technological conditions, along with a shift to the right in Global politics, reinforce the arguments made by Linfield and Sontag for engagement with Holocaust documentation on an individual level and increase the importance of archival scholarship.

In conclusion, deconstructing this photograph has enabled me to more fully understand it as both an image and a cultural artefact. It is part of a body of images produced at the behest of the British government during the Second World War and is representative of the experience of many thousands of victims of Nazi violence. These images were deemed sufficiently well validated to be admitted as evidence in a legal trial. In composition this particular photograph breaks taboos of respect for the dead in its graphic nudity and recalls the male gaze of Western nude painting. This complicates simplified narratives of female victimhood, and this has been suggested as a reason for why the image was not circulated in the media at the time it was produced. Additionally, the makers of this body of work gathered supporting evidence regarding the Jewish identity of its subjects but choices made by the British government and news media limited the information relayed to the public. Pictorial records of concentration camps were overwhelmingly perceived by the public as authentic but have since been challenged by anti-Semitic groups. Viewing images of violence such as these is morally complicated and a convincing case can be made that it is exploitative and voyeuristic but the experience of deconstructing this photograph has persuaded me that it is necessary.

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