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A SURREAL LANDSCAPE OF DEVASTATION:

AN ANALYSIS OF LEE MILLER'S *GRIM GLORY*
PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE LONDON BLITZ

LYNN HILDITCH

As surrealist war documents, Lee Miller's war photographs of the London Blitz, published in Ernestine Carter's *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (1941), effectively demonstrate what Susan Sontag referred to as "a beauty in ruins". Miller's Blitz photographs may be deemed aesthetically significant by considering her Surrealist background and by analyzing her images within the context of André Breton's theory of "convulsive beauty". Therefore, this essay aims to demonstrate how Miller's photographs not only depict the chaos and destruction of Britain during the Blitz, they also expose Surrealism's love of strange, evocative or humorous juxtapositions in the form of artistic visual representations of a temporary surreal landscape filled with fallen statues and broken typewriters.

En tant que documents de guerre surréalistes, les photographies du Blitz de Londres par Lee Miller démontrent ce que Susan Sontag a appelé « la beauté en ruines ». Ernestine Carter a publié ces photographies dans « *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* » (1941). Elles ont une importance esthétique en vertu de leur contexte lié aux surréalistes, et dans la possibilité de les analyser en regard de la théorie d'André Breton sur « la beauté convulsive ». Cet article propose que les photographies de Miller non seulement représentent le désordre et la destruction de la Grande-Bretagne pendant le Blitz, mais qu'elles exposent aussi l'affection des surréalistes pour les juxtapositions étranges, évocateurs et humoristiques des représentations visuelles artistiques d'un paysage plein des statues effondrées et des machines à écrire cassées.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed under London Bridge,
so many, I had not thought death had
undone so many.

(Eliot 65)

Lee Miller's photographs of the London Blitz, including the twenty-two published in Ernestine Carter's *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (1941), effectively demonstrate what Susan Sontag describes as "a beauty in ruins" (Sontag 67). As a former student and muse of Man Ray during the late 1920s and early 1930s and a close associate of the Surrealists in Paris, Miller was able to effectively utilize her knowledge of Surrealism (and other art forms) to create an aestheticized reportage of a broken city ravished by war. Miller's war photographs may be analyzed within the context of André Breton's theory of "convulsive beauty"—his idea that an object or scene of devastation can be represented or analyzed as something beautiful by convulsing, or transforming, it into its apparent opposite. Therefore, Miller's war photographs not only depict the chaos and destruction of Britain during the Blitz, they also reveal Surrealism's love for quirky or evocative juxtapositions while creating an artistic visual representation of a temporary surreal landscape of fallen statues and broken typewriters. As Leo Mellor writes about these dualities, "The paradox of Miller's wartime reportage was announced in the title of her book of documentary photographs, *Grim*

Glory; that is to say, the coexistence of darkening mortality and ideal exaltation, like a Baroque conceit" (Mellor 75).

On the 4 September 1939, the day after war was declared in Britain, the Ministry of Information had been established with responsibility for news and press censorship, home publicity, and overseas promotion in Allied and neutral countries. Therefore, all non-Governmental publications were subject to strict censorship (The Art of War). *Grim Glory* was no exception and was primarily published as a propaganda effort aimed at the United States with the American title *Bloody But Unbowed*. However, the book proved surprisingly popular, achieving five printings in Britain alone. Editor Ernestine Carter recalls in her memoirs *With Tongue in Chic* (1974) that her and Miller "saw eye to eye on the oddities and awesome beauty, as well as the horrors of the Blitz" (56-57).

Like a Surrealist play on words, the British people had waited months for "the Phoney War," "Bore War," "Funny War" or "Sitzkrieg," as the period from September 1939 to April 1940 became known, to the point that gas masks, black-outs, bomb shelters and evacuations had become part of their new—one might say "surreal"—way of life (Burke 200). The war, therefore, had forced London to assume a strange persona, the British people becoming the living subjects of a George Grosz-style painting. As Carolyn Burke writes:

By October, Londoners were taking the increasingly surreal aspects of the Sitzkrieg in their stride. They covered windows with brown paper strips, installed “Anderson” shelters (named for the minister of home security) in the garden, if they had one, and, if not, prepared for the Blitz with the government-issue earplugs. Signs saying TO THE TRENCHES showed the way to dugouts in Hyde Park. By November, when the fog blanketed the city, flashlights were scarce; cigarettes gave a welcome source of light. People collided with one another; pedestrians found their way home by means of white lines on the curbs and gateposts (Burke 201).

Miller’s contemporary at *Vogue*, Cecil Beaton, who was also working for the MoI photographing the London bomb damage for the publication *History Under Fire* (1941), referred to the chaotic nature of the Blitz in his diaries as a product of the “laws of blast” (Beaton 37) and it was the results of these “laws” that Miller chose to capture in her *Grim Glory* photographs. To a Surrealist photographer like Miller, capturing the destruction with her Rolleiflex camera was “not so much unfathomable as liberating”; a unique opportunity for an artist to create something aesthetically inspiring out of the devastation (Beaton 37). As Burke adds, “By wrecking some targets and sparing others, the bombs created wonders in the midst of chaos—as if Magritte or Dali had remade the landscape” (Burke 205). For example, in Miller’s photographs, a broken window

pane takes on the persona of the Gas, Light and Coke company trademark, Mr Therm (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 76); a bomb-ravaged building in Knightsbridge is transformed into the Venetian Bridge of Sighs (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 63); and in a London park a grounded barrage balloon becomes the giant “egg” of two extremely proud-looking geese (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 104). The creative potential of these scenes were endless. British Surrealist Julian Trevelyan noted in his 1957 autobiography *Indigo Days* that it “became absurd to compose Surrealist confections when high explosives could do it much better, and when German soldiers with Tommy-guns descended from the clouds on parachutes dressed as nuns. Life had caught up with Surrealism or Surrealism with life, and for a giddy moment we in England lived the irrational movement to its death” (Trevelyan 80).

Miller had already learnt from 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 horrendous it is (Miller 315). André Breton also noted in *L’Amour Fou (Mad Love)* (1937) how “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” (Breton 8). It was with this philosophy in mind that Miller

began to photograph the Blitz. For example, beneath one of Miller's Blitz photographs depicting a bombed Non-conformist chapel taken in Camden Town in 1940, Carter has described in words what Miller has captured in visual form while replicating Trevelyan's thoughts. She writes:

If all that one saw was unrelieved tragedy, life would be unendurable in these beleaguered cities. Fortunately, the wanton behaviour of explosives and blast occasionally produces effects that are ironical, freakish, beautiful, and sometimes even funny, although the irony is grim and the humour threaded through with pathos (Carter, *Grim Glory*, 33).

With an element of dark humour, or *humour noir*, the caption beneath the photograph reads, "1 Non-conformist chapel + 1 bomb = Greek Temple" (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 74). Miller's reference to classical architecture seems to indicate that war can create time shifts by bringing the past into the future. All that remains of the building are the Ionic pillars standing defiant, reminiscent of those at the ancient Temple of Athena Nike in Athens.¹ In another photograph of the blocked doorway of that same Non-conformist chapel, Miller has used irony and wit to suggest that the human congregation who once occupied the chapel has now been metamorphosed into a "congregation of bricks" (Penrose 103),² thus indicating that even the House of God was not safe from the destructiveness of war. Here, Miller appears to be making an observation

on the sacrilegious nature of war, while at the same time displaying an attitude that is essentially Dadaist in using images to express anger, disillusionment and the irrationality of war.

Several of Miller's *Grim Glory* photographs use random or chance objects, often placed or arranged by war, which reveal her awareness of the Surrealist practices of juxtaposition, the use of the *objet trouvé* (found object) and *humour noir*. As a result, these photographs combine an everyday aesthetic with a natural ability to search out the extraordinary in ordinary life. *Indecent Exposure* (1940), for example, focuses on two naked male mannequins wearing top hats and left standing at the side of the road with arms aloft as though hailing a taxi, or perhaps giving a sarcastic Nazi salute (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 77). One of the mannequins, who has no male genitalia, has a sign hung around his neck that reads, "Look what Adolf had done to me," suggesting that Miller is commenting on the humour of the British people who, amongst these dark times of the war, appear to have turned one small piece of the destruction into an amusing Surrealist scene. Similarly, *Remington Silent* (1940) depicts a mangled typewriter which, ironically, has been made "silent," by the bombings in London (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 72). Antony Penrose notes that the *Remington Silent* typewriter "was prized for being the quietest typewriter, but in the photograph it is tapping out an eloquent essay about the destruction of war," (Penrose, 102) just as Miller

did in her photo-essays for *Vogue* magazine. Indeed, war correspondents, like Miller, used the typewriter as a weapon for attacking the enemy with words by describing and recording the war scene; and besides the typewriter, Miller had a second, arguably more powerful weapon for attacking with visual images—her camera.

In *Piano By Broadwood* (1940), Miller has photographed another *objet trouvé*—a musical instrument, once a symbol of affluence and high culture, which has been reduced to a piece of debris, yet another casualty of the Blitz (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 73). The piano displays the manufacturer's plate which indicates that it was produced by John Broadwood & Sons, one of the oldest and most prestigious piano companies in the world, making instruments for some of the greatest musicians and composers such as Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and Liszt, and for royalty including the future Queen Elizabeth II. Burke describes the crushed object as “an eloquent testimony to a time when wailing sirens and droning dive-bombers composed London's nightly music” (206). This description of Miller's photograph is reminiscent of her second husband Roland Penrose's series of dark paintings including the 1940 work *Black Music* that depicted the noises of war as musical instruments. Perhaps Miller, like Penrose, saw the artistic significance of a musical instrument, whether captured in a photograph or a painting, as a way of making some sense out of the madness of conflict.

Even more poignant perhaps is *Revenge on Culture* (1940),³ a photograph depicting the statue of a female figure lying amongst the rubble (Carter, *Grim Glory*, plate 71). The figure, probably a Roman or Greek goddess, once a symbol of beauty, has been thrown from her pedestal and reduced to another chance object amongst the ruins, like the typewriter and the Broadwood piano. In this respect, the sculpture has become an object which has been transformed back into a piece of art (a photograph) via Miller's camera lens, thus symbolizing the rebirth of art, and perhaps the emancipation of women who adopted male roles during the war. It is also possible that Miller saw some similarities between herself and the statue—Miller had appeared as a statue brought back to life in Jean Cocteau's 1930 film *Le Sang d'un Poète*. In these three photographs—*Remington Silent*, *Piano By Broadwood* and *Revenge on Culture*—Miller has not only captured the oddities of war by photographing the *objet trouvé*; she has also produced a stark visual commentary on the death of culture (writing, music and art) as one of the consequences of war.

In conclusion, it becomes apparent when looking at photographs depicting the dark, nightmarish landscapes of urban destruction taken during the Blitz, including Miller's *Grim Glory* photographs, that there is a distinct lack of dead bodies on display. As Ian Walker explains, “In the great mass of photography of the Blitz, there are very few pictures of actual bodies, largely because of self-censorship.

Rather buildings, statues, objects and mannequins become metaphors for the destruction wrought on real bodies” (156). Miller’s photographs of the London Blitz, therefore, demonstrate an ability to transform, or “convulse,” the *real*—the horror and devastation, the brutality of war—into the *surreal*, producing sensitive and at times humorous and witty portraits of war. As Nigel Henderson put it: “Surrealism was everywhere in a sense. Houses chopped by bombs while ladies were still sitting on the lavatory, the rest of the house gone but the wallpaper and fires still burning in the grate. Who can hold a candle to that kind of real life Surrealism?” (Hoffman and Read 12). While it might be argued that her later war photographs, particularly the harrowing images taken in 1945 at the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau,⁴ were perhaps less informed by a Surrealist aesthetic due to Miller’s humanistic need to document the scenes for future audiences, Penrose writes that even throughout Miller’s earlier *Grim Glory* photographs:

[an] anger burns deep. But there is also a wit, as Lee shouts at the devil, in her photographs of the congregation of bricks tumbling out of the door of the wrecked Non-conformist chapel; the mannequins, naked but for their top hats, trying to hail a taxi in an empty street; and the two ineffably proud geese posing in front of a colossal silver egg, an adopted barrage balloon (Penrose 103)..

This quotation effectively sums up how Miller’s photographs display an element of surprise often incited by a feeling of indignation conjured up by being a willing observer to the horrific consequences of World War Two, and how she used her Surrealist eye to produce unconventional photographic representations of the dark spectacle of war.

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(Endnotes)

1 Miller and Roland Penrose had travelled to Athens during July and August 1938, a trip that included visiting the islands of Delos and Mykonos, the theatre of Epidaurus in Peloponnese, and Delphi via the Thermopylae pass to the ancient monasteries of Meteora. This trip featured in Penrose's *The Road is Wider than Long* (1939; Walker 76).

2 Although the photograph of the blocked doorway was taken for *Grim Glory*, it was never included in the publication.

3 According to Antony Penrose, "Revenge on Culture" was reproduced numerous times during the war even appearing on the front cover of an Arabic newspaper (Penrose 104).

4 Miller was an accredited war photographer with the US Armed Forces and was with the 20th Armoured Division, the 42nd Infantry Division (also known as the Rainbow Company), and the 45th Infantry Division when they liberated the Dachau "death camp" on 29 April 1945.

Lynn Hilditch has a Ph.D from the University of Liverpool and has lectured on various aspects of the visual arts and culture, including film history and theory, photography and modernism, photojournalism, and aesthetics. Her research interests include the depiction of war and destruction in art and photography, representations of the Holocaust in the visual arts, and the socio-historical representation of gender in twentieth-century popular culture. Lynn's doctoral research focused specifically on the Second World War photography of the American Surrealist and war correspondent Lee Miller and explored how Miller's war photographs may be analyzed as examples of 'surreal documentary.' Lynn has published work on various aspects of visual culture including book articles on Lee Miller's war photography, aesthetics and war, surrealism and photography, memory and memorialization, and 'fan culture' relating to the public persona of Audrey Hepburn. Lynn is a member of the Desmond Tutu Centre for War and Peace Studies at Liverpool Hope University.

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