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Lee Miller: A “Selfie” from the War

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1. Introduction and research question

Lee Miller was a photographer, who is best known for her work covering the end of World War II in Europe. But before she took on photography herself, she was as a famous model in the late 20s in New York. She went to Paris to study with Man Ray, learned the techniques of photography but also the surrealist style. Lee Miller and Man Ray collaborated on certain subjects, but she was also model and muse to many pictures Ray took of her. Eventually she grew into a photographer in her own right, first as fashion photographer for Vogue and eventually as war correspondent for British and American Vogue. Although her work is complex, a certain surrealistic quality or intention is inherent to all of her pictures.

On the 1st of May 1945 the United States Army took over Munich and with it Hitler's house. There Lee Miller took a famous series of pictures, they show herself in Hitler's office, in Eva Braun's bed and most amazing of all in Hitler's bathtub. Her colleague David Scherman, also a war photographer, actually pulled the shutter, but she clearly staged the pictures herself. The bathroom picture, which was published once in Vogue, but did not raise much controversy at the time, has been interpreted and analyzed in many ways since then. It is a striking picture considering all the facts and there is not much one can add to its interpretation from a psychological or historical point of view.

I would like to take a less "serious" approach, or a more modern view on Lee Miller's intention behind the bathroom picture. While it clearly took some nerve to get into that bathtub, I would like to show, that because of Miller's background and experience as a model, her intention behind the picture, or the effect she wanted to achieve was very much the same as today's intention behind "selfies": they function as proof of presence, proof of taking part in an action, they are less self-portrait and more a signal to your peers.

2. Biography Lee Miller (1907 – 1977)

Lee Miller was born in 1907 to an upper middle class family in Poughkeepsie, New York. She was thrown out of several private schools and only later on continued her education at the Art Students League in Manhattan and Vassar College, New York.

At the age of nineteen she was discovered by Condé Nast and made a fast career as a model for Vogue. She met and was photographed by many of the best photographers of that time and developed an interest for photography herself. She went to Paris (1929-1932) and became a student, assistant and lover of Man Ray, who taught her, in her own words, everything there was to know about taking pictures¹. She met other Surrealist artist, like Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, André Breton and Jean Cocteau.

After returning to New York City she opened her own studio, doing commissioned work. In 1934 she married an Egyptian Industrialist and lived in Cairo for a few years, but got divorced in 1939. At the outbreak of World War II she was in London and decided to stay there. She was living with Roland Penrose, a surrealist artist, whom she later married. There she worked for British Vogue as a fashion photographer. But she also started to take pictures of London during the Blitz, which later led to her being sent to cover the end of World War II as a photo-journalist for Vogue. Together with Georgette Chappelle, Toni Frissell, Margaret Bourke-White, and Therese Bonney she was accredited as an American war correspondent.² Miller concentrated on the Allied liberation of Europe, during which she covered the liberation of Buchenwald and Dachau. She not only published photographs, but also texts in British and American Vogue. In 1945 she went to Munich with the United States Army, where she got access to Hitler's house.

Lee Miller pretty much gave up photography after the war and even disassociated herself from it. She stayed in London and only took occasional pictures of artist friends. After her death in 1977 her son Antony Penrose found a collection of negatives and wrote a book "Lee Miller's War" (Boston 1992) which sparked a new interest in her work.

¹ Albertina 2015, p. 9.

² Albertina 2015, p. 49.

3. Body of work

Lee Millers oeuvre can be divided into several, quite distinct, chapters.

Surrealism: Her formative years were in New York and Paris working with Man Ray. "It was under the tutelage of Man Ray that Miller first learned about the evocative, expressive potential of everyday objects." ³ In more recent receptions of her work, it has been seen more as a working together with Man Ray.⁴ Together they invented the process of solarization and collaborated on many subjects. Her somewhat surreal and ironic approach can be detected throughout her entire career. (Illust.1)

Fashion photography for Vogue: Before the war Miller was hired to do commercial work for Vogue. For the most part these were regular fashion photographs, good craftsmanship, but not outstanding in any way. Starting in 1940 she was also commissioned to take pictures on subjects relating to the war. "The linking of fashion photographs and themes relevant to the war is also revealed in a photograph of two women wearing protective masks." ⁵ (Illust. 2)

Photojournalist in Europe: In 1944/45 Lee Miller covered the siege in St. Malo and the liberation of Paris. She then went on to Jena, Bonn, Weimar, Cologne and the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Dachau. Together with her pictures her texts were published in Vogue throughout the year of 1945.⁶ She took pictures of everything, heaps of corpses, SS-men, that had just commit suicide, former SS-guards, that were beaten by former inmates. "Lee Miller brought the war to Vogue." ⁷ (Illustr. 3)

It is interesting, that her name is never mentioned in books about war-photography (f.i. "The Camera at War", "Das fotografische Gesicht des Krieges"), unlike her colleague Margaret Bourke-White - even though they sometimes took pictures of the same scene (Illustr. 4). "The most harrowing

³ Davis C.S. 2006, p. 4.

⁴ Albertina 2015, p.12, 13.

⁵ Albertina 2015, p. 47.

⁶ Miller 1995, p. 111.

⁷ Miller 1995, p. 106.

and dramatic coverage came from the liberation of the German concentration camps. Many photographers covered it – William Vandivert, Johnny Florea, Margaret Bourke-White and George Rodger.”⁸ I personally think, that Miller took “pictures of the war”, but was not a war photographer. “[...] her wartime photos include examples in which she treated art photography and reportage not as binary opposites but instead combined them.”⁹

Photojournalist in Munich: During Miller’s stay in Munich, which was considered the center of National Socialism and therefore the occupation was important as a symbol of defeat for Americans, she covered the taking over of the city by the US army, including Hitler’s and Eva Braun’s house and the ruins of Berchtesgaden. This is the period when Miller produced the bathroom picture, which I want to concentrate on. She also wrote about her view of Munich, its inhabitants and what she learned about Hitler. She took a very subjective stance, in both her pictures and her writing.¹⁰ “Lee Miller’s written reports adhere to a rather one-dimensional search for facts. But as a photographer she created visual realities – sometimes staged, sometimes documentary – that are interesting and significant precisely because of their subjectivity and ambiguity.”¹¹

Selfportraits: Outside of the infamous bathroom picture, Miller had taken pictures of herself before. Not during the war, but earlier on during a period when she was still modeling herself, and during her surrealist period. These differ greatly from the picture in Hitler’s bathtub. They are technically well done but rather conventional, stylized portraits aiming at beauty rather than a statement. (Illustr. 5)

⁸ Lewinski 1978, p. 135.

⁹ Albertina 2015, p. 131.

¹⁰ Albertina 2015, p. 105.

¹¹ Albertina 2015, p. 115.

4. Research subject

Lee Miller took a series of six pictures sitting and cleaning herself in Hitler's bathtub. (Illustr.6) One was chosen for publication in Vogue, it was published with several other pictures of Hitler's house. (Illustr. 7) She also took two pictures of her colleague David Scherman in the bathtub. The photographs are dated April 30, 1945, the day Hitler committed suicide.¹²

We see Miller sitting in the tub, cleaning her neck. We only see her shoulders and her head, there is no gesture of "sexiness" or posing for a male viewer. Her expression is calm and serious. Her dirty combat boots stand on a small bath mat in front of the tub. Her clothes are lying on a little stool on our right. On the left we see in a frame a picture of Hitler leaning on the rim of the bathtub. On the right we see a small statue of a naked "Venus". Next to that is a bellsystem to call servants. What we see of the bathroom looks quite ordinary. Lee Millers head is in the center of the picture. The subject of the "female bather" has a long history in painting and is usually erotic, or was used as a pretense to study a naked female body. We can assume that Miller knew this. But she makes no reference to the erotic in her pose.

There are two accounts about taking the bath, one by Lee Miller herself: "[...] the 179th regiment drove to Hitlers house and occupied it. Davie and I had dinner with them, and we spent the night there – we used Hitlers toilet and took a bath in his bathtub and made ourselves comfortable with some real good pals." ¹³

And David Scherman writes: "Lee took a leisurely overdue bath in Hitler's tub while an angry lieutenant of the 45th, soap and towel in hand, beat on the locked door outside." ¹⁴

¹² Albertina 2015, p. 107.

¹³ Miller 1995, p. 76.

¹⁴ Penrose 1992, p.12.

5. Research status and interpretations

I would now like to introduce some of the interpretations that have come up since the publication of the book by Lee Miller's son Anthony Penrose in 1992. There is no written documentation of any reaction to the bathtub picture after its first publication in *Vouge*.

Carolyn Burke writes in Miller's Biography, describing this scene: "[...] a shower hose is looped behind her head. In this deliberately staged setting, her look suggests, it was impossible not to think of those who died in Dachau's "bathhouse": the elected victims having shed their clothes walked innocently.....Turning on the taps for the bath, they killed themselves." ¹⁵

Becky E. Conekin's book is more about Miller's writings for *Vouge* than her pictures. But she also suggests that Miller, with the intrusion of sleeping in Eva Brauns bed and taking a bath in the tub of the dictator, she mocked the dead Hitler by blatantly invading his privacy. ¹⁶

Katharina Menzel-Ahr takes a very thorough approach and classifies Miller's pictures in Hitler's house as self-presentations. In her opinion they serve to legitimize her participation in the war. ¹⁷ She describes Miller's fascination with very intimate areas of the house, but also indicates the practical side, it was probably good to take a bath. But to her these dramatizations mainly symbolize the position of the „conquerer“. ¹⁸

Menzel-Ahr tries to shed light on Miller's motive with a connection to pictures Miller's father took of her as a child and teenager. He was an amateur photographer, who took numerous pictures of her. They are somewhat questionable, since she is often shown naked, once in the snow outside the family home, and again as a teenager, naked in the bathtub." [...] mit extrem zudringlichem Kamerablick, hatte Lee Miller's Vater seine Tochter 1930 nackt

¹⁵ Burke 2005, p. 262.

¹⁶ Conekin 2013, p. 170.

¹⁷ Menzel-Ahr 2005, p. 203.

¹⁸ Menzel-Ahr 2005, p. 207.

in der Badewanne in Stockholm fotografiert.”¹⁹ But in her own presentation she is not a passive object. (Illustr. 8)

There are quite a number of psychoanalytical interpretations that in my opinion often go too far. Jutta Göner sees the cleansing of the body as a manifestation of the defeat of National Socialism.²⁰ Amy Lynford argues that Lee Miller becomes a passive model again in these pictures.²¹

Melody Davis claims that Miller had a problematic relationship with her father. The bath was a revenge on both her father and Hitler. By bringing the ashes of dead Jews to Hitler's own bathtub she overcame their authority.²²

There are two essays that I would like to quote, because they have a political direction. Elissa Mailänder writes: “Miller's critical approach to National Socialism is a subtle juxtaposition of frivolity and persecution translated into her own medium.” And she continues: “Lee Miller's photographs [...] are so effective because they served the photographer as more than just a medium with which to present herself. [...] She broke with the utopian Nazi aesthetic. [...] Miller effectively shows that the private is eminently political.”²³

Ms. Zox-Weaver compares four different artists and their „relationship“ to Hitler in her book „Women Modernists and Fascism“. Miller is one of them and Zox-Weaver presents her as an „answer“ to Leni Riefenstahl.²⁴ It is her opinion, that Lee Miller saw in Hitler the possibility of establishing her own creativity through the act of dissecting the totality he came to represent. She sees in Miller's bathroom picture a subjective and unconventional way to come to terms with politics and power.²⁵ „Her investigation of Hitler's domestic life, in which attraction and revulsion are inextricably knotted, pivots on strange acts of self-implication at the same time that it seeks to undo the dense web spun around the Nazi leader.“²⁶

¹⁹ Menzel-Ahr 2005, p. 208.

²⁰ Menzel-Ahr 2005, p. 209, 255. I am quoting M.-A. here.

²¹ Menzel-Ahr 2005, p. 209, 255. I am quoting M.-A. here.

²² Davis 1997, p. 315, 316.

²³ Albertina 2015, p. 115.

²⁴ Filmdirector “Triumph of the Will”, often connected to Nazi-propaganda.

²⁵ Zox-Weaver 2011, p. 5.

²⁶ Zox-Weaver 2011, p. 17.

6. Self-presentation in art history and today

Throughout art history artists have made paintings and pictures of themselves. „Selfies“ are not an invention of the digital age and artists were always interested in self-presentation. To name just a few: starting with Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Gustav Courbet and Egon Schiele. Many female artists used their own image in their art. Käthe Kollwitz, Hannah Höch and Francesca Woodman, Frida Kahlo especially brought her whole life on the canvas.²⁷ Hippolyte Bayard took the first dramatised picture of himself in 1840 and called it „Selfportrait as a drowned man“.²⁸ Photography made it easier to take portraits as well as self-portraits and these portraits were more accurate. This might be one of the reasons why self-presentation became more common in the 20th century.

I would like to mention Cindy Sherman at this point because her famous film-stills (although produced much later) at first seem to have a connection to Lee Miller's bathtub picture. There seems to be a similar absurdity present, a kind of uncomfortable „weirdness“. But Cindy Sherman always takes on a role, she is never herself and her pictures are premeditated. What they might have in common is that they both work with provocation.

Today's „Selfies“ are also a way of self-presentation and staged dramatization, their producers want to make an impression. Tobias Koch says: „Special clothing, the photographing in special places from different perspectives, the dramatization with other people and abstract actions, are all meant to create a certain image with the viewer and enhance the public prestige.“²⁹

„Selfies“ also have something to do with controlling your own image. Something Lee Miller, because of her background and experiences, was definitely interested in.

²⁷ Sauer-Polonik 1999, p. 3.

²⁸ Koch 2016, p. 16.

²⁹ Koch 2016, p. 23.

7. Interpretation – A “Selfie” from the War

I think it is safe to say, that Lee Miller’s picture in Hitler’s bathtub contains more than one set of meaning. Considering her experience as a model, her relationships with other artists, especially the influence of surrealist art, her commercial work and then her “success” as war correspondent, is a mixture of influences that maybe at that moment all came together. But I also think that under the circumstances there was no time to plan a well-thought-through self-dramatization. The picture of Hitler leaning on the rim of the tub was necessary to identify it as Hitler’s bathroom, maybe with no deeper meaning. Antony Penrose suggests: “[...] that the inclusion of the Neo-classical statue may have been Miller’s own “sophisticated joke”, one understood by the high-class readership of Vogue magazine”.³⁰

Miller herself always claimed that she was “busy making documents and not art”.³¹ In descriptions of her personality she comes across as a person with irreverent humor, somewhat superficial, used to being in the center and “in the picture”, and getting a lot of attention.

But as a war correspondent you are never yourself in the picture. “But he/she is part of the picture: as a witness on location, that sees, but is never seen.”³²

The first time I saw the picture of Lee Miller in Hitler’s bathtub it struck me as surreal and unsettling, something I could not imagine doing myself. But to her, since childhood, it was quite “normal” to be both in front and behind the camera. And at that point she wanted to show where she had been and what she had achieved. She was proudly presenting a “selfie” to her readership.

³⁰ Davis 2006, p. 7.

³¹ Miller 1995, p. 79.

³² Holzer 2003, p.13.

8. Conclusion

After having almost been forgotten, since the early 90s Lee Miller's photographs covering the end of World War II, have been reviewed and exhibited all over Europe and the United States. Her admittedly subjective view makes it possible to see her work less as a documentary and more as an artistic, emotional approach.

Espacially her picture of herself in Hitler's bathtub has given rise to numerous essays and books. Surprisingly the picture did not raise a reaction at the time of it's first publication in Vogue Magazine. But since then maybe the public has become more aware of self-presentation, especially in art, and this is why this picture has been interpreted in so many ways. For the most part it is considered a very deliberate dramatization, a carefully thought out placement of articles full of meaning. For Miller a way of coming to terms with her own childhood, her hate of Hitler and Germans in general and her emancipation as an artist.

In my opinion it was not possible under the circumstances to spend much time thinking and arranging a dramatization. It seems more likely that Lee Miller acted on the spur of the moment, realizing that she was taking part in an historic event and claiming it for herself.

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10. Illustration evidence

- Illustration 1, page 4: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 2, page 4: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 3, page 4: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 4, page 4: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 5, page 5: Becky E. Conekin, Lee Miller. Fotografin, Muse, Model, Zürich 2013.
- Illustration 6, page 6: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 7, page 6: Catalogue Exhibition Albertina Vienna 2015, Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- Illustration 8, page 7: Katharina Menzel-Ahr, Lee Miller. Kriegskorrespondentin für Vogue, Fotografien aus Deutschland 1945, Marburg 2005.

11. Illustrations



Illustration 1

Lee Miller, Untitled (Exploding Hand) Paris, 1930

Vintage Gelatin Silver Print

22,3 x 27,4 cm



Illustration 2

Lee Miller, Fire Masks

London, 1941

Scan from original negative



Illustration 3

Lee Miller, Dead SS Guard, Floating in Canal

Dachau, 1945

Vintage Gelatin Silver Print

15,9 x 15,2 cm

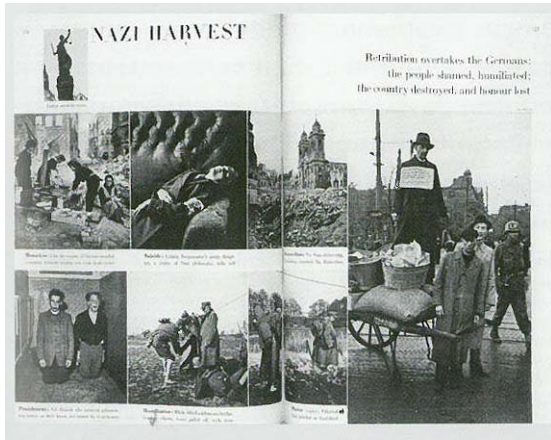


Illustration 4
 Left Lee Miller, Vogue USA, June 1945
 Right Margaret Bourke-White,
 Life USA, May 1945

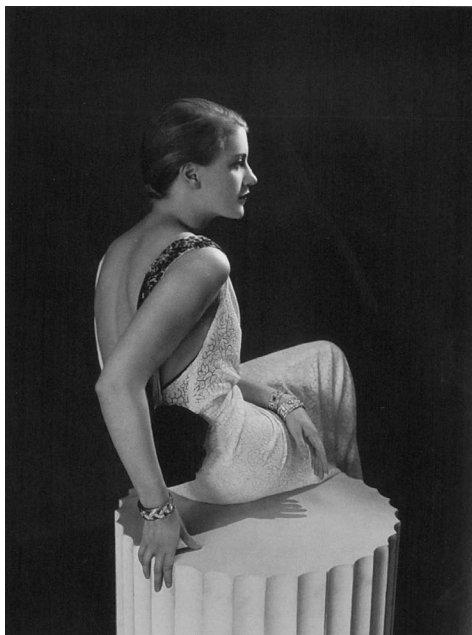


Illustration 5
 Self-portrait, New York,
 ca. 1933



Illustration 6
 Lee Miller & David Schermann
 Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub
 Munich, 1945
 Vintage Gelatin Silver Print
 11,5 x 10,8 cm

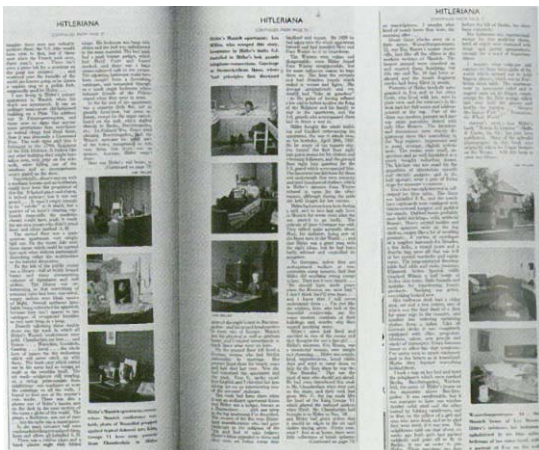


Illustration 7
 Lee Miller, „Hitleriana“, Vogue UK,
 July 1945



Illustration 8
 Theodore Miller: Lee Miller in the bathtub of the
 Grand Hotel, Stockholm, 1930