

# The Spanish Civil War not only ushered in a new era of mechanized warfare, but also a new era of war documentation. Discuss.

With the corresponding modernisation of both warfare and filmic techniques, the violence of the Spanish Civil War was propelled to a hitherto unheard of, all-encompassing level; it impinged upon the civilian private sphere and opened the Spanish borders to the mediated outside world. Susan Sontag writes that ‘the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was the first war to be witnessed (‘covered’) in the modern sense’<sup>1</sup>; it was the beginning of a newly constructed mode of photographically driven, mass war documentation. The aesthetic of the filmic, large-scale, ‘objective’ coverage of the conflict inevitably seeped into the literature of this period. Walter Lippmann wrote in 1922 that ‘photographs have the kind of authority over imagination today, which the printed word had yesterday [...] they seem utterly real.’<sup>2</sup> But in the epoch of the Spanish Civil War, the partition of text and photography should not be considered so divisive. In the journalism and documentation of those writers who swamped to record the fight against fascism in Spain a new kind of convergence of filmic and narrative techniques emerged; the establishment of what Lara Feigel calls a ‘camera consciousness’.<sup>3</sup> The opening line of Christopher Isherwood’s 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin*, ‘I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking’<sup>4</sup>, demonstrates perfectly this 1930s trope. The potential of the literary narrative to be a ‘passive, recording, not thinking’, ‘utterly real’ entity is experimented with (and often undercut) by such Spanish Civil War writers as Martha Gellhorn,

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Great Britain: Penguin, 2003) p.16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>3</sup> This term is used repeatedly by Lara Feigel in *Literature, Cinema and Politics 1930-1945* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (London: Vintage, 1998) p.9.

Josephine Herbst and George Orwell in *The Face of War*<sup>5</sup>, 'The Starched Blue Sky of Spain'<sup>6</sup> and *Homage to Catalonia*<sup>7</sup> correspondingly. Their works respectively explore and interrogate literary documentary aesthetics, defined by Phyllis Frus as those such as the 'self-effacing narrator, a tendency toward narration rather than discourse, and the reluctance to interpret, instead allowing facts to "speak for themselves."'”<sup>8</sup>

In her journalism pieces 'High Explosives for Everyone', 'The Besieged City' and 'The Third Winter', Gellhorn's 'camera conscious' impulsive can be seen via a constructed montage of the war-torn cityscape. Gellhorn is the descriptive, largely surface-level observer of civilians who, for the most part, remain anonymous behind her hidden, voyeuristic lens. She details war-time tragedies in oftentimes matter-of-fact, simplistic and toneless language. For example, she writes:

An old woman, with a shawl over her shoulders, holding a terrified thin little boy by the hand, runs out into the square. You know what she is thinking: she is thinking she must get the child home' [...] Somehow you do not believe you can get killed when you are sitting in your own parlour, you never think that. She's in the middle of the square when the next one comes.  
A small piece of twisted steel, hot and very sharp, sprays off from the shell; it takes the little boy in the throat. The old woman stands there, holding the hand of the dead child, looking at him stupidly, not saying anything, and men run out toward her to carry the child.

(p. 22)

Gellhorn stands back from the scene, refraining from comment while mechanically drawing attention to detail – 'a small piece of twisted steel [...]' – rather than utilising rhetorical devices, abstract aesthetics or explicit emotional displays to uncover this horrific tragedy of warfare. The pace and tone are ones of monotony. At other times, she depicts similar tragedies by way of simple paratactical observations: 'these children were all wounded' (p. 44); 'they were unbelievably thin' (p.

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<sup>5</sup> Martha Gellhorn, *The Face of War* (London: Granta, 1993). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Josephine Herbst, 'The Starched Blue Sky of Spain' in *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain and Other Memoirs* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 1962). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 92.

45). As such, sensitive calamities are noted with a detached, unthinking bluntness. She shocks via her mimetic mundanity, the combination of an ordinary tonality with the catastrophic.

As with the non-specific description of the 'old woman' and 'thin little boy' in the quotation, Gellhorn largely depicts the Spanish people as anonymous, employing universal nouns such as 'people', 'someone', 'everyone' throughout her pieces. She thus reduces them from subjects to objects via her uniforming 'camera consciousness'. Claiming authority, she asserts authorial omniscience over subjects' thoughts - as she writes above, with clear-cut consensus, 'you know what she is thinking: she is thinking [...]'. Via her repetitive use of the universalising plural pronoun address 'you', Gellhorn assumes an unnuanced and assertively generalising interpretation of the scene, as such, presenting it as 'fact' (in camera-like fashion). Of course, neither Gellhorn nor the reader really knows what this woman is thinking, but by presenting her thoughts as concrete, nuance is obfuscated and the Spanish experience is homogenized. Sontag writes that, 'to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power.'<sup>9</sup> In Gellhorn's similarly filmic gaze, there is a certain aura of 'power'. Only in 'The Third Winter', does Gellhorn's style shift a little from this theorization, as she contrapuntally juxtaposes focused, localised scenes and dialogue of the Hernandez family's experience of the war with sections of bracketed text in which more anonymous and generalised passages of the war-ravaged cityscape ensues. But still she reveals a camera-like capability with this aesthetic, zooming in and out on the shelled metropolis.

In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell's narrative is much more personal than Gellhorn's, but he too assumes a tone of dissociation and detachment from his subjects to give a guise of camera-like

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<sup>9</sup> Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 4.

objectivity. He holds a similar authority to Gellhorn over those he observes, diminishing them to the objects of his gaze. On the opening page of his text he writes,

the pathetic reverence that illiterate people have for their supposed superiors. Obviously he could not make head or tail of the map; obviously he regarded map-reading as a stupendous intellectual feat.

(p.1)

I mention this Italian militiaman because he has stuck vividly in my memory. With his shabby uniform and fierce pathetic face he typifies for me the special atmosphere of that time. He is bound up with all my memories of that period of the war.

(p. 2)

Orwell's descriptions are reductive, demeaning and highly fetishized depictions of the working class militiaman. In many senses, these figures are not really people at all to Orwell, rather an idea, a memory, a symbol of all that the Spanish struggle and the working classes represents for him. Regarding him from a distance, he 'appropriates' (in Sontag's words) the man for his own uses.

Orwell's detached stylistic continues, for example he writes, 'the whole experience of being hit by a bullet is very interesting and I think it is worth describing in detail' (p. 137), proffering an unbefitting, disproportionate amount of mundanity. As here, Orwell's language is often notably anti-aesthetic. Like Gellhorn's, it is remarkably simple and observatory, even as he regards himself. Their respective works seemingly follow the cultural assumption that the less aesthetic the text, the more factuality it holds. Their direct, mimetic documentary stylistics hold the implication of truth, objectivity and reality (if such terms do in any sense exist). Through the 'camera consciousness', Gellhorn and Orwell attempt to reconstruct the reality of the war itself, creating a sort of textual hyperreality. But as Jonathan Culler illuminates, 'rhetorically, no state or condition is more imaginary than any other: all characters and personae are created; the world is constituted after the fact by texts; and in a manner of speaking "all speech acts are imitation speech acts"'.<sup>10</sup> Followingly,

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Culler quoted by Frus, p.11.

linguistic and narrative mimesis as the least 'imaginary', most 'real' form (as popular discourse would have us believe), should be considered as a constructed notion that is worth questioning. The indication of the real is not reality, and this is often forgotten by readers.

Furthermore, these texts are tinged with a political incentive. Their semblances of 'truth' may strive to rally more support for their respective causes. Walter Benjamin advocated 'politicising art' to thwart the fascist aestheticization of politics via the mass media.<sup>11</sup> The anti-aesthetic stance was thus adopted by left-wing writers to focus on the political issues of the war. The texts themselves form part of the conflict, arguably propagandistic in nature, with Gellhorn's avid support of the Republic (she writes in her introduction 'a journalist friend observed that I ought to write; it was the only way I could serve the *Causa*' (p. 16)) and Orwell's significantly anti-Stalinist standpoint. However, Gellhorn conceals her motive in her text by posing as a passive and neutral observer. While Orwell does draw attention to his partisanship - 'in case I have not said this somewhere earlier in the book I will say it now: beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events.' (p. 186) - he announces it on the penultimate page, almost as an afterthought. There is a feigned ignorance and unreliability in his manner - 'in case I have not said this somewhere earlier' - as if positioning this comment at the end of his text is not a strategic one. Thus, the anti-aesthetics tropes of 'camera consciousness' may be used to conceal political motives.

Followingly, it is important to remember that Gellhorn and Orwell's texts are centered around their personal and subjective experiences and gazes - they are not 'reality'. John Berger writes that 'every image embodies a way of seeing'.<sup>12</sup> The presented literary images of the Spanish Civil War

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin quoted and summarised by Feigel, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), p. 10.

are constructed via a combined subjectivity of not just politics, but also gender and nationality (to name just a few contributing factors). Berger illuminates that perspective, since the Renaissance, 'centres everything on the eye of the beholder'.<sup>13</sup> While this is often perceived as evidentiary reality, he notes 'the inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator, who [...] could only be in one place at a time'.<sup>14</sup> It is contradictory precisely because 'the eye of the beholder' is just the view of a singular person, hardly an overarching 'reality'. The same can be said of the photograph or 'camera consciousness', forms that are naturalised as self-evident, yet really only disclosing of one particular perspective.

When Gellhorn and Orwell do embed themselves in the text, they present themselves as authentically 'bearing witness', in doing so, they also paradoxically reveal their experience to be a limited and subjective one. Gellhorn voices this challenge of the war journalist in the following personal letter:

What beats me is the tone [...] Personal? Am I there too? Impersonal, the camera eye? [...] The first person singular makes me shy: idiotic. [...] I must have seemed very peculiar indeed to them [Spanish civilians]: very old, out of the blue, a foreigner, a woman alone.<sup>15</sup>

Gellhorn implies that with the approach of the 'impersonal, the camera eye', she is not textually there. Indeed, a photograph tends to mask that there was ever a photographer present; it does not draw attention to itself. It is as if self and an authentic 'camera consciousness' cannot coexist. With an according aesthetic, Gellhorn as a journalist tends to blur into the background of her works, so much as to become almost invisible. The picture she paints of herself here as starkly standing out, 'out of the blue, a foreigner, a woman alone', is clearly disguised in her texts. However, there is also an inconsistency in her style, as she sporadically slips out of this camera-like aesthetic, unable to

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<sup>13</sup> Berger, p.16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gellhorn, letter to Hortense Flexner, quoted by Catherine Mary McLoughlin, *Martha Gellhorn: The War Writer in the Field and in the Text* (Manchester University Press, 2007) p. 3. [n. p.]

completely dislocate herself from the scene. Feigel writes 'when objective camera vision is the dominant subjective mode, how can you distinguish between subject and object, self and world'<sup>16</sup>, and Gellhorn seems to struggle to distinguish between the two in her utilisation of the filmic gaze.

Orwell's narrative, on the other hand, is a largely self-focused one, it is a memoir both about individual growth and personal politics written in a pensive and reflective manner,

but now that I can see this period in perspective I do not altogether regret it. [...] from a personal point of view – from the point of view of my own development – those first three or four months [...] formed a kind of interregnum in my life, [...] they taught me things that I could not have learned in any other way.

(p. 82).

The focus on the self is heavily weighted, the first person and possessive pronoun 'my' used excessively. For Orwell, the conflict is an integral part of his life and therefore he cannot personally separate himself from the event (as the camera pretends to). He reveals how temporality shifts his perspective on the war; he cannot write in real-time in the way the camera immediately captures the scene before it. There is a certain masculine energy in his ability to claim space so wholly, while Gellhorn, as a woman, feels 'shy' and 'idiotic' when using the first-person pronoun. His privilege enables using the war as a form of personal development; his focus on the self thus problematic, removing focus from Spanish victims who are really suffering. His text is abundant with his subjective experiences.

Josephine Herbst in her piece 'The Starched Blue Sky of Spain', is explorative and reflective of the effect self and subjectivity have on hers, and others', observations of the Spanish conflict. She writes, 'I don't know anything really about Spain except what came through me and my skin.' (p. 134). This is a war in which presentations are deeply personal, she suggests, and thus will differ

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<sup>16</sup> Feigel, p. 154.

greatly. Her exploration and analysis is refreshingly real, in some senses much more genuine than the distanced observatory aesthetic of Orwell and Gellhorn. While she draws attention to herself, as Orwell does, she uses her voice reluctantly; she feels shame at the way journalists work, their privilege and the way they command space in a war that is not theirs. Hers is a piece of slow journalism, written much later than the war. As such, the way she thinks about both the conflict and journalism itself is radically different. She writes ‘apart from a few news accounts, a few descriptive articles, I have never written about Spain.’ (p. 132) – this is a hesitancy driven by the apprehension she feels about displaying an inauthentic version of Spain, she does not want to do it a disservice. However, arguably she focuses too much on journalists and notions of self, seemingly conforming to the position Feigel illuminates ‘of the privileged voyeur who is too engrossed in how interesting voyeurism is to make the imaginative leap that will render suffering as suffering.’<sup>17</sup> Ultimately hers is a piece about journalism itself (divorced from the ‘camera consciousness’) rather than the suffering of the Spanish people.

All of these writers explore the Spanish conflict through a foreign gaze, thus their texts will always possess a distance from the conflict, a fact that the ‘camera consciousness’ conceals. Herbst draws attention to the massive privilege enjoyed by foreign correspondents in the Spanish Civil War, particularly of those writers like Ernest Hemmingway with his two cars and stocked wardrobe of food and essentials, while the locals have little to nothing. She writes that, ‘all I wanted was to get out again, somewhere, to people who were “in it”.’ (p. 149). This sense of detachment from the conflict divides the world of the foreign correspondent from those involved in the war. Herbst’s desire to be part of the suffering, in the horror of ‘it’, is a voyeuristic, perverse form of tourism.

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<sup>17</sup> Feigel, p. 152.



Gellhorn further reveals her dissonance from the war by function of humour and satire. Her style caters to a foreign audience; working by relationality, it uncomfortably familiarises and defamiliarizes, normalises and juxtaposes scenes of war. She writes, 'In Barcelona, it was perfect bombing weather' (p. 38), combining the blasé normality of a weather report with the horror of war. This sense of discordant nonchalance continues; as the bombs fall, the hotel staff says,

'I regret this, mademoiselle. It is not pleasant. [...] I said yes, indeed, it was not very nice, was it? He said that perhaps I had better take a room in the back of the house, which might be safer. On the other hand, the rooms were not so agreeable; there was less air.

(p. 19)

Gellhorn's immense privilege is revealed with ironic tones; images of her snug safety in the hotel clash horribly with the war-torn scenes of homelessness she depicts. But Gellhorn, like Herbst, does also acknowledge her shame at being a foreign spectator - she concludes 'The Third Winter':

I suddenly said, 'the third winter is the hardest.'  
Then I felt ashamed. They were strong brave people and didn't need me to say cheering words for them.  
'We are all right, Senora,' Mrs Hernandez said, making it clear at once, saying the last word in her home about her family.  
'we are Spaniards and we have faith in our republic'

(p. 52)

Gellhorn reveals her indignity at her voice and her openness at commenting on the conflict. As such, there is a humbleness in her detachment in the text, her refusal to remark on a war that is, ultimately, not hers.

Orwell is not so self-aware, he bares his individualistic license and privilege at being able to easily step away from the war. He concludes *Homage to Catalonia*,

Southern England, probably the sleekest landscape in the world. It is difficult when you pass that way [...] to believe that anything is really happening anywhere. Earthquakes in Japan, famines in China, revolutions in Mexico? Don't worry, the milk will be on the doorstep tomorrow morning, the New Statesman will come out on Friday. The industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface. Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood.

(p. 187)

He seems ignorant of his entitlement, his middle-class experience of England and his ability to perceive it as an apolitical space with all the sentimentality, romanticisation and quaintness of English and childhood nostalgia. While working class people continue to suffer both in Spain, around the globe and at home, he cocoons himself in his cosy bubble. It furthers the idea that he appropriates Spain for personal reasons, rather than authentically illuminating the workers' struggle.

In this new era of war documentation, the propensity for the emergent textual 'camera consciousness' to 'objectively' record, with its accompanying constructions of 'truth', is thus a feat that ultimately proves itself stilted by authorial subjectivities inseparable from the narrative gaze. Even photographs, as Sontag clearly demonstrates in her text *Regarding the Pain of Others*<sup>18</sup>, are non-objective materialisms; they are certainly not 'passive', nor necessarily 'real', hiding behind a naturalized and often unquestioned guise of veracity. As Sontag aptly confers, 'the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses'.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the literary documentary narrative omits and filters; it is a carefully crafted medium that only appears to 'speak for itself'. As Feigel writes, 'camera consciousness is always in danger of inducing passivity'<sup>20</sup>, and as such it is crucial to engage with the modes of production of these documents. Spain is described by Valentine Cunningham as both 'a poet's war', 'a worker's war', 'a people's war'<sup>21</sup>, and a 'journalists' war'<sup>22</sup>. While the consciousnesses of this war followingly seemed to be a collective one (that often ignored the idiosyncrasies of Spain – its people and politics), the individual stances and selfhood of writers still remains a feature that cannot be aligned with 'objective' camera culture.

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<sup>18</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> Feigel, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Valentine Cunningham, Introduction, *Spanish Front Writers on the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xx.

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, 'The Spanish Civil War' in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing* ed. By Kate McLoughin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 185-196 (p. 191).

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