

The human and the inhuman: visual culture, political culture, and the images produced by George Rodger and Henri Cartier-Bresson in the Nazi concentration camps¹

Abstract

This article aims to grasp some aspects of the notion of humanism in photography and its closeness to the political culture and the visual culture in the period, through the specific experiences of George Rodger and Henri Cartier-Bresson, two photographers who were first-hand witnesses and provided accounts of horror in the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II. George Rodger photographed the Bergen-Belsen camp as soon as it was liberated by the British troops. Henri Cartier-Bresson was there with a film crew recording the deported masses newly freed from the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. These experiences came to have profound impact on the biography and work of both of them. In the two cases, there is a notion of humanism linked to World War II events, which is observed in photography and photographic representation, and it has a significant consequence for the contemporary visual culture.

Keywords: Visual Culture; Political Culture; War Photography; Photojournalism; Concentration Camps.

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O humano e o desumano: cultura visual, cultura política e as imagens feitas por George Rodger e Henri Cartier-Bresson nos campos de concentração nazistas

Resumo

Este artigo busca compreender alguns aspectos da noção de humanismo na fotografia e sua proximidade com a cultura política e a cultura visual do período, a partir das experiências específicas de George Rodger e Henri Cartier-Bresson, dois fotógrafos que viveram em primeira mão e que deram testemunho do horror dos campos de concentração nazistas ao final da Segunda Guerra Mundial. George Rodger fotografou o campo de Bergen-Belsen assim que foi libertado pelas tropas britânicas. Henri Cartier-Bresson esteve com uma equipe de filmagem registrando as massas de deportados recém-libertados dos campos de concentração e extermínio nazista. Essas experiências viriam a ter impactos profundos na biografia e no trabalho de ambos. Nos dois casos, está presente uma noção de humanismo atrelada aos acontecimentos da Segunda Guerra Mundial, que se faz ver na fotografia e na representação fotográfica, de significativa consequência para a cultura visual contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Cultura Visual; Cultura Política; Fotografia de Guerra; Fotojornalismo; Campos de Concentração.

Men have told me about humanity,
But I have never seen men or humanity.
I have seen several men astoundingly different from each other.
Separated from each other by a space with no men.
Alberto Caeiro²

After World War II, the Allies had difficulties to judge and punish those responsible for atrocities committed in the fields. Hannah Arendt stresses that after the war, during the trial of war criminals at Nuremberg, a new theoretical framework had to be prepared to legally deal not only with the mass murder committed by the Nazis, but also because their target consisted of civilians of various nationalities, as well as due to the harsh cruelty with which such a murder was methodically put into practice. This new concept was named as *crime against humanity*. According to the author:

It was precisely the Jewish catastrophe that prompted the Allies to conceive of a “crime against humanity” in the first place, because, Julius Stone has written, in *Legal Controls of International Conflict* (1954), “the mass murder of the Jews, if they were Germany’s own nationals, could only be reached by the humanity count.” And what had prevented the Nuremberg Tribunal from doing full justice to this crime, which had so little to do with war that its commission actually conflicted with and hindered the war’s conduct, was to be tied up with the other crimes. (ARENDR, 2000, p. 208)

Accounts by survivors of the camps corroborate this accusation. Various descriptions converge in stating that what the concentration camp system denied them was just their status as human beings. Thus, Robert Antelme, in *The human race*, states that “the outcome of our struggle will be just the lively and often lonely claim to eventually remain as human beings,” while Primo Levi entitles his book about the time he was admitted to Auschwitz by using this eloquent question: *Is this a man?*³. The notion of

² In LOPES, Teresa Rita. *Pessoa por Conhecer - Textos para um Novo Mapa*. Lisboa: Estampa, 1990, p. 336.

³ Antelme’s quote continues: “Saying that then we felt challenged as men, as members of a species, may seem a retrospective feeling, an a posteriori explanation. However, that was more immediately felt and experienced, and this is, incidentally, exactly what was wished by the others [common law prisoners and the SS administration]. Putting the quality as a human being into question triggers an almost biological claim of belonging to the human species. Then, it serves to meditate on the limits of this species on the

humanity and, as a consequence, that of *humanism*, brought together, this way, new meanings at the end of World War II⁴.

In different ways, the British photographer George Rodger (1908-1995) and the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) witnessed the human catastrophe of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps, and they shared the notion of humanity and humanism that permeated the cultural environment, including the political culture, at that time. This experience impacted both their photographic making, which may be seen through the aesthetics of their images, and their professional careers – they would become co-founders of the cooperative photographic agency Magnum, in 1947.

The Return

Henri Cartier-Bresson volunteered to work as a photographer along with the French army⁵, and he was captured in Saint-Dié, in Voges, on June 22, 1940, the date when the armistice was signed. He was sent to a *Stalag*, a German field with war prisoners, and managed to escape at his third attempt, three years later. Despite these camps with

distance of ‘nature’ and the relationship with it, so on a certain solitude of the species, and finally, above all, it serves to think of a clear vision of its indivisible unity.” And Levi opens his book with the following poem: “Just think if this is a man/ who works in the middle of the clay,/ who does not know peace,/ who struggles for a piece of bread,/ who dies for a yes or a no./ Just think if this is a woman,/ with no hair and no name/ with no strength to remember,/ empty eyes, cold womb,/ as a frog in winter.” For both of them, PENNA, João Camillo. *Sobre viver no lugar de quem falamos (Giorgio Agamben e Primo Levi)*. In SELIGMANN-SILVA, Márcio (org). **Palavra e Imagem, Memória e Escritura**. Chapecó: Argos, 2006, p. 128.

⁴ Penna even states that the very notion of humanity is due to the World War II event: “We might say, imitating Michel Foucault’s gesture, when situating the emergence of the concept of man in modern times on the threshold of the 18th and 19th centuries, in *Words and things*, that the notion of *humanity* – to be distinguished from that of man – comes after World War II, following the ‘discovery’ of the German death camps. It is precisely in this context that the Nuremberg Tribunal established, for instance, the category of ‘crimes against humanity,’ or ‘crimes against the human status,’ as Hannah Arendt prefers to name it.” PENNA, João Camillo. *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

⁵ His biographer, Pierre Assouline, comments: “Spring 1940. Daladier’s cabinet, whose ‘cowardice’ frustrates many soldiers, is forced to step down. Paul Reynaud, the new president of the Council assigns to Philippe Boegner, one of the former heads of *Vu* and *Paris-Soir*, the task of creating a Photographic Service of the Armed Forces as a counterpart of the large number of images of German generals published by the press. Only they appear, even in the American magazines! The journalist realizes, stunned, that the French advertising has only eight photographers abroad... He immediately draws up a list with eighty names, and the name of Henri Cartier-Bresson is at the top of it, then he is a member of the ‘reserve’ infantry. Eighteen are called to go to his office at Buttes-Chaumont. He is the first to arrive.” ASSOULINE, Pierre. **Cartier-Bresson, o olhar do século**. São Paulo: L&PM, 2008, p. 134.

prisoners were not like the concentration and extermination camps, Cartier-Bresson also had a close contact to the effects of concentration camps with civilians when making the movie *Le Retour*.

Once escaping from captivity, he recovered his camera, which had been buried near a farm for the sake of security, and started shooting photos again. He registered the liberation of Paris and the last days of the war in Europe. Less than a year after his escape, in early 1944, Cartier-Bresson aimed to film the return of deported prisoners, since the opening of the first fields taken back due to the German retreat. However, the time needed to raise money, organize production, and tackle bureaucratic issues led the movie to start being produced only months later, in early 1945, when the fields were almost empty. Finally, it was officially ordered by the French Ministry of Prisoners, Deportees, and Refugees to U.S. Information Service, financed by the latter, shot in 35 mm, directed by Cartier-Bresson, and filmed by operators of the movie section in the U.S. Army, captain Krimsky and lieutenant Richard Banks, as well as a sequence shot in Paris by Claude Renoir, and narrated by Claude Roy (MICHAUD, 2009, p. 89, and ASSOULINE, 2008, pp. 158-159).

Le Retour, although not showing in detail the time when the camps were opened, brings the next moment, maybe less dramatic, but not less tragic, in which thousands of newly freed individuals receive food, early medical care, and also hygiene care, especially against a typhus infestation; and then the slow return process itself, since the chaos on German roads due to the massive march, the time-consuming movement of the human masses, life in the temporary repatriation centers, again long columns of deportees, by foot, by train, by plane, on their way back, until the exciting arrival of French repatriated individuals in Paris.



Images 1 and 2. Frames of the movie *Le Retour*.
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oN6_j7TGh4.

On the one hand, *Le Retour* is a testimony and a journalistic account of recent history. As highlighted by Philippe-Alain Michaud (2009, p. 89), this movie is inserted into a political culture specific to the immediate French post-war period, aiming at unity and reconstruction: “According to the prevailing ideology of national reconciliation, the movie combines in the same mythology of ‘return’ war prisoners, workers from the STO [Service du Travail Obligatoire, enlistment, and forced deportation of French workers to Germany] and deported individuals (in the comments, there is no mention of the extermination of Jews)”⁶. On the other hand, it is also the personal return of Cartier-Bresson, who was a captive in a *Stalag*, played the role of some men he filmed, and his images, according to his biographer Pierre Assouline, show the effects of this experience, bearing its weight. According to the author (ASSOULINE, 2009, p. 159), “*Le Retour* is the account of a long transhumance. From the first to the last images, everything is movement – lines, parades, marches, rows. We see human masses waiting. Many, who need to relearn how to live in freedom, only move when ordered to do so.”

Unlike the time he made movies during the Spanish Civil War, when he did not shoot photos (see ZERWES, 2013, vol. 1), Cartier-Bresson followed with his *Leica* the camera operators he was directing in *Le Retour*. Thus, one of the most recognized photographs of his entire career dates back to this moment; it is the record of an instant within one of the sequences of the movie. In April 1945, the film crew recorded, in the

⁶ In the original, in French: “Selon l’idéologie régnante de la réconciliation nationale, le film associe dans la même mythologie du ‘retour’ prisonniers de guerre, travailleurs du STO et déportés (dans le commentaire, il n’est pas fait mention de l’extermination des Juifs).”

provisional center for repatriation in Dessau, Germany, an outdoor hearing, improvised due to the will of justice and revenge of former prisoners against collaborationists. During this hearing, a woman who had been denounced and arrested by the Gestapo witness against the person who had ratted on her and she could not hide her anger towards this individual – a sequence shown by Images 3 to 6, corresponding to 13'05" in the movie. In turn, Cartier-Bresson's photograph shows the exact moment when the accuser moves towards the denounced woman, whose upset face and attitude embodies and demonstrates all her rage against the informer. This woman takes an absolutely submissive attitude, her arms are close to the body and she is gazing at the floor. In the foreground, a stolid man is taking notes and he is observed from a side view. Behind, many crowded people look at the scene and, left, one of them is wearing the distinctive striped uniform of the Nazi camps.



Images 3, 4, 5, and 6. Frames of the movie *Le Retour*. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oN6_i7TGh4..

Although they were taken by the same look, constituting a double, the instant chosen for shooting the camera and recorded by photo has gained much greater impact than the entire movie. The sequence it was taken from is formed by a slightly wider

section than the picture, where the accused woman is brought before the man sitting at the table and next to the accuser. As the focus plane comes closer, forming a frame nearly identical to the photo, the narrator says that one of the first tasks of the inhabitants of provisional centers for repatriation is identifying the few *misérables*, traitors and Gestapo agents, who try to mix with the deported people. At this moment, the camera is even closer, more focused on the faces of the accused and the accuser, then the latter, who was talking normally, seems to get upset and – for fractions of a second – her expression becomes angry, and she slaps the accused in the face, who moves to the left⁷.

The comparison between this sequence in the movie and the photo is meaningful this way: Cartier-Bresson triggered the shutter exactly during these fractions of a second in which a pronounced change occurs in the scene, and the 24 frames per second in the movie provide all the possibilities he denied on behalf of this, making visible an analog of the contact sheet in this image. Thus, the hearing photo has no sound, no narration, and no motion showing the entire sequence, but it is comparable to the movie as a narrative. That moment the scene changes, i.e. when the woman twists her mouth, inflates her chest, looks directly at the accused, and takes her arm behind getting ready to slap, is loaded with the idea of movement, fully focused on the woman who accuses the informer, because the rest of the image is static. The idea of movement, here, creates a very symbolic image, thus a narrative. All the anger accumulated over years of subjugation and humiliation is concentrated in the contorted features of that woman.

This particular moment the photographer sometimes looks for, where there is a key change, which is an aesthetic and static representation of the *idea of movement*, will be years later, through the English translation of Cartier-Bresson's book, *Images à la sauvette*, published in 1952, entitled *The decisive moment* in this language.

The notion of this *instant* is, therefore, recurrent in his photos. He was already playing with the idea of movement since the early 1930s. One example is the photograph taken near the Gare Saint-Lazare, in Paris, in 1932. In it, a man is portrayed at the very

⁷ *Le Retour*, 35 mm, 32'24", dir. Henri Cartier-Bresson, Germany-France, 1945.

moment he leaps over a puddle of water. This jumper is photographed at the very moment he has left behind the point supporting him, but he has not reached the new supporting point, yet. Attention to geometry, so dear to Cartier-Bresson, is clearly visible, unlike the man himself, who is shown to us only as a black silhouette, and his inverted double is reflected on the water beneath his feet. What distinguishes the photograph shot in 1932 from that taken in 1945 is not, therefore, the ability to display an instant growing motion, but his narrative ability, and this may be directly related to a wartime experienced by the photographer.

Pierre Assouline (2008, p. 161) stresses that in the last moments of the war, during the period when prisoners were liberated from camps, Cartier-Bresson “had never been such a reporter before.” His working method changed, and he, for the first time, took detailed notes and prepared long legends for his photos. This level of detail might have the purpose of, at the same time, help newspapers and magazines that publish the photos and prevent them to change the meaning of images. The author states that “he writes down everything, even with regard to the seemingly more anodyne scenes, and does not hesitate to tell a story when it is needed” (ASSOULINE, 2008, p. 161), and he cites one of these legends, to the picture of two men in a motorcycle, who are smiling, in front of a crowd that celebrates:

Russian camp, American side. Russians are waiting to cross. Two Frenchmen on the motorcycle, officers who have just crossed the Russian zone on the way to Paris. The pilot is Lieutenant Henri de Vilmorin. Lieutenant Gendron is sitting behind him. Both of them were close to De Gaulle in the FFL. The motorcycle is named *Caroline* and it bears them since Berlin. They had been captured in the Vosges this winter during the last battle. Lieutenant Vilmorin was, out of his seven thousand colleagues in the Stalag, the last to leave. He directed the liberation committee. (ASSOULINE, 2008, p. 162)

Similarly, his filming experience that took place during the Spanish Civil War contributed to a change in his photographic making and, especially, during this anticlimax, which was the end of World War II in Europe. Peter Galassi (1987, pp. 41-44) and Philippe-Alain Michaud (2009, p. 91) agree that the notion of what would later be called *decisive moment* changed between the photos that Cartier-Bresson produced in the 1930s and those from the immediate postwar period. In the years he shot images

such as the famous scene where a man leaps over a puddle of water behind Gare Saint-Lazare, in Paris, in 1932, the decisive moment would appear in his photos as a look that cuts a perception fragment, which isolates it, takes it from the very context. In turn, in the next decade, the decisive moment would become a slice of space and time that might contain within it the meaning of the depicted event, i.e. the event as a whole. According to Michaud, from one period to another, what changes is that the image is not taken out of its event, but it preserves an idea of continuity, it suggests a before and after. The film practice during the Spanish and the world wars might have helped Cartier-Bresson to use his decisive moment in favor of narration⁸.

The experience of concentration camps, as a prisoner and then as a filmmaker and photographer, had an impact on the way he walked after these years of war. He did not resume the paint job, which was pursued until the mid-1930s in André Lhote's studio⁹. After *Le Retour*, he abandoned cinema for many years. On the other hand, he took photography more seriously at this time. In early 1947, he and the already famous war photographer Robert Capa (1913-1954) met at the MoMA, in New York, which had mounted an exhibition of Cartier-Bresson's photographs¹⁰. He repeated several times that, at the time, a conversation with Capa helped him deciding to adopt the photo report as a profession¹¹. A few weeks after the exhibition was opened, in February 1947,

⁸ According to Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Le caractère imprévisible de la photo instantanée, la capacité à capturer et à fixer les manifestations paradoxales de la réalité en les décontextualisant, l'image conçue comme une sorte de trouée dans le tissu du monde et, sur un plan formel, les compositions géométriques intuitives, la compression des avant-plans et des arrière-plans ainsi que l'affirmation d'une surface picturale: toute la pratique du film marque la mise entre parenthèses de l'ensemble de ces 'valeurs' qui structuraient la pratique de la photographie de Cartier-Bresson au commencement des années 1930." MICHAUD, 2009, p. 91.

⁹ Pierre Assouline states that "even so, he does not return to painting or drawing. Not after what his eyes saw. Not after what he has experienced. His curiosity for humanity as it is remains intact, but now it requires another type of engagement. As if war, or rather, the field, had announced the end of utopias of the 'regular photographer' to leave the 'secular reporter' be highlighted." ASSOULINE, Pierre. *op. cit.*, p. 162.

¹⁰ During the years he was a captive in the German camp, the photography curators of the MoMA, Beaumont e Nancy Newhall, thought that the Frenchman was dead, and they started preparing a 'posthumous' exhibition of his photographs. When Cartier-Bresson reappeared, he decided to see his work again and participate in the exhibition curatorship, traveling to New York in 1946. The exhibition was inaugurated on February 4, 1947. CARTIER-BRESSON, Henri. *Scrapbook*. London, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2007, pp. 15-20.

¹¹ Cartier-Bresson said, at least eight times in interviews, that Capa advised him. "Capa me dit: 'Évite l'étiquette de photographe surréaliste. Fais du photojournalisme. Sinon, tu tomberas dans le maniérisme. Garde le surréalisme au fond de ton petit cœur, mon cher. N'hésite pas. Bouge !' Ce conseil élargit mon champ de vision." *apud* RITCHIN, Fred. *Intro. In Magnum photos*. Collection photo poche n° 69. Paris: Nathan, 1997, s/p; "It was Robert Capa, when I had my exhibition in 1948 at the MoMA, who

and the conversation with Capa, Cartier-Bresson received the news of the Magnum foundation, and his role as a partner, during a trip photographing the USA, for a book that has never been released.

Atrocities

Although George Rodger had not undergone forced labor in the concentration camp system, he went through the deeply impactful experience photographing the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. Rodger was a war correspondent for *Life* magazine since 1939. In early March 1945, he had entered Germany with the British troops: on March 26 he was there when Churchill crossed the Rhine River, and between March 28 and 31 he moved through the region already witnessing the large number of deportees of various nationalities who were beginning to take the roads controlled by the Allies. Rodger was then sent by *Life* to Paris, and he was there when the first Nazi concentration camp was liberated. Ohrdruf was taken by U.S. troops on April 4, 1945. The first photographs of the horrors found there were published in the London-based *Times* newspaper, and in the U.S. *News Chronicle* and *Daily Mirror* on April 9. The next day, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* also brought photos of the profusion of emaciated bodies found in Ohrdruf (ZELIZER, 1989, pp. 89-90). In turn, on April 11, U.S. troops entered Buchenwald, and even worse scenes were recorded in this field.

Rodger came back to Germany the same day that the British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen, April 15, and the following days, he and his driver went to the site. According to this driver's account, Dick Stratford, cited by Rodger's biographer, Carole Naggar (2003), they entered through the open gate and walked unaccompanied by the field area. Other photographers, both civilian, such as Rodger, and military, reported a similar freedom to portray the fields as soon as they were liberated. There were no guidelines on how or what shooting, but a repeated feeling that what they were seeing

told me to be very careful about any label which is attached to anybody's work, and on such occasions he warned me: 'If the label 'Surrealism' is attached to you' (...) 'you will have an exhibition once in a while and your work will become precious and confidential. Keep on doing what you want, but use the name 'photojournalism,' which will put you in direct contact with what is going on in the world.'" Apud COOKMAN, Claude. *Henri Cartier-Bresson Reinterprets his Career*. History of Photography, vol. 32, nº 1, spring 2008, p. 66.

should be shown to the world (ZELIZER, 1989, p. 92). Therefore, Rodger's work that day followed the particular method he had developed during the 51 battle fronts he had photographed so far. As usual, he was accompanied only by his driver. As they entered, no other photographers or army personnel were found, and they drove down the huge field area. Dick Stratford says:

There was nothing we could do. We just said hello to people and that was all. There was no possible conversation. A day after that the army arrived to take charge of the camp. [...] They got the SS to pick up the bodies and bury them properly, because there were just mounds of bodies. It was beyond imagination. (Apud NAGGAR, 2003, p. 138)¹²

In addition to shooting, Rodger also took notes at site on the photographs, and an information survey, which he later detailed and typed, sending along with the movies to *Life*. This typed account provides accurate data, such as the estimate that, only in March, 17,000 people had died of starvation, and even then continued to die an average of 300 to 350 people, "far beyond the help of British Authorities"¹³ (Apud NAGGAR, 2003, p. 138). However, he also brings a dramatic tone, trying to describe the scale of the disaster:

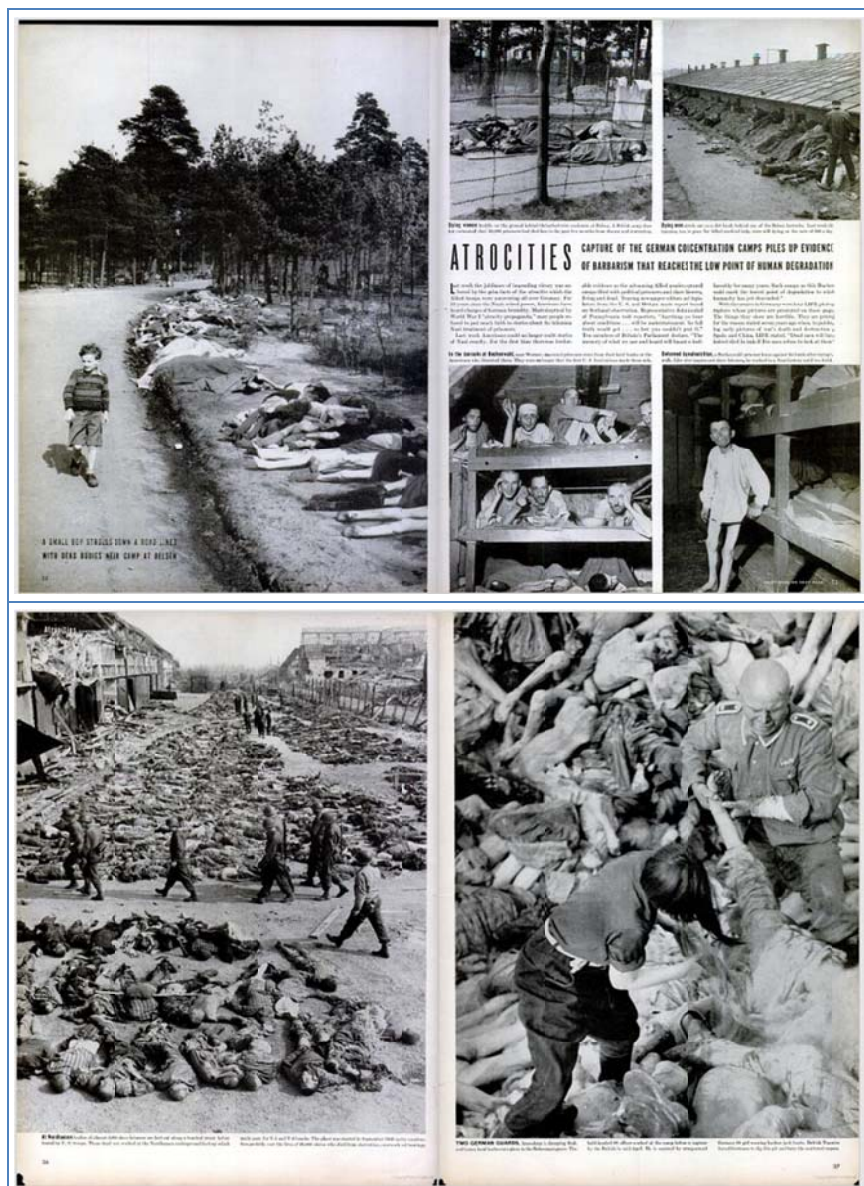
The magnitude of suffering and horror at Belsen cannot be expressed in words and even I, as an actual witness, found it impossible to comprehend fully – there was too much of it; it was too contrary to all principles of humanity – and I was coldly stunned. Under the pine trees the scattered dead were lying not in twos or threes or dozens, but in thousands. (Apud MILLER, 1997, pp. 43-44)¹⁴

¹² "Não havia nada que nós pudéssemos fazer. Nós só dissemos oi para as pessoas, e isso foi tudo. Não tinha possibilidade de conversa. Um dia depois disso o exército chegou para assumir o comando do campo. [...] Eles fizeram os SS recolherem os corpos e os enterrarem adequadamente, porque havia apenas montes de corpos. Era inimaginável."

¹³ "Muito além da possibilidade de serem ajudados pelas autoridades britânicas."

¹⁴ "A magnitude de sofrimento e horror em Belsen não pode ser expressa em palavras, e até eu, como uma testemunha ocular, achei impossível o compreender completamente – havia uma quantidade muito grande dele; era muito contrário à todos os princípios de humanidade – e eu fiquei atordoado. Em baixo dos pinheiros, os mortos espalhados estavam deitados não em dois ou três, ou em dúzias, mas em milhares." About Rodger's working method, Dick Stratford said: "Rodger was a very independent person. He knew what he wanted and went to great lengths to get it. He did not mix with other photographers. We went out mainly on our own. He did not work with a writer. He wanted to be on his own and write his own background information. When we went into Belsen, the gates were wide open and I did not see any other photographer or army personnel. We just drove around. [...] [George] was the only person in there taking still photographs. He had a little black book and he took the notes. He also typed every night. I never saw him really upset, it was all part of the job. Never, except after Belsen." Apud NAGGAR, Carole. *George Rodger, An Adventure in Photography, 1908-1995*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 136.

Rodger's report brings in advance the warning that this horror scene could not be fully expressed in words. Still, his work there as a photojournalist aimed to document and communicate what he witnessed through words, but mainly by images, for *Life* magazine readers.



Images 7 and 8 – pages of Life magazine on May 7, 1945. Source: <https://books.google.com.br/books?id=8UkEAAAAMBAA&printsec=frontcover&dq=life+may+7+1945&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiMipCNwcrKAhWCjZAKHd-RCgoQ6AEIHTAA#v=onepage&q=life%20may%207%201945&f=false>.

The magazine published, under the title *Atrocities*, three of his photographs on May 7, 1945, along with Buchenwald's photographs taken by Margaret Bourke-White, and others from the Gardelegen camp, near Berlin. Rodger's photographs published in this issue are taken more open in the field, where there are large amounts of emaciated bodies. Regarding these wide shots, a statement by Rodger is often cited, where he tells about the anguish to see himself looking, after some time taking photos with Belsen, for landscape frames filled with victims from an aesthetic viewpoint (see NAGGAR, 2003, p. 140). These photographs he shot helped, however, building a visual representation of mass murder in the gas chambers that took place in the Nazi camps. Photographs showing bodies piled up, being carried by people or machinery, have been identified as an iconography of the concentration camp as a historical event¹⁵.

In addition to these rather wide images, Rodger produced a much more extensive documentation in the field. A part of the set of images he produced there, which was not published by *Life*, consists of some pictures, both of survivors and some of the SS soldiers who were working in the field, but they were in the hands of allies, waiting for trial. These photographs have a quite different tone from those that have been published. The portraits of female soldiers stand out, which bring specific aesthetic features, at the same time they evoke a different feeling in the viewer. Due to their peculiarity within the larger body of images made by Rodger, these pictures allow us to articulate some thoughts on the conditions of their making and some of the photographer's aims.

¹⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman raises this issue, despite the fact that Bergen-Belsen was not an extermination camp. At the same time, the author put into question the permanence of this identification. "That the photography of Rovno in the Ukraine – the imminent execution of women and children of the Mizoc ghetto – should *still* be used as a document for the advent of the gas chambers at Treblinka; that the photograms of the bulldozer pushing corpses into a pit at Bergen-Belsen should *still* be associated with the extermination of the Jews by Zyklon: all of this cries out the need for 'a genuine archaeology of photographic documents' as Clément Chéroux suggests. It could only be done by 'examining the conditions of their creation, by studying their documentary content, and by questioning their use'." DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *Images in spite of all*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 66-67.



Images 9, 10, 11, and 12 – George Rodger. Portraits of female soldiers of the SS, former guards at the Bergen-Belsen camp: Annalese Kohlmann, known for her cruelty; Elizabeth Volkenrath; Magdalene Kessal, and Frieda Walter. Germany, April 1945. Source: <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/browse/george%20rodger?q.8129907598665562501=1000&q.opnId=4>.

In the issue published on May 7, 1945, where *Life* made the report with Belsen's photos available, the text in the magazine reproduces this tone by presenting the Nazi crimes as aimed not towards any particular people, but to humanity¹⁶. The report presents a justification to publish such shocking images, referring to a magazine issue published seven years earlier:

With the armies in Germany were four LIFE photographers whose pictures are presented on these pages. The things they show are horrible. They are printed for the reason stated seven years ago when, in publishing early pictures of war's death and destruction in Spain and China, LIFE stated, "Dead men will have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them."¹⁷

The quoted sentence refers to the text of a report on the wars in China and Spain, published in the issue of January 24, 1938. In it, the magazine advocates for what might be the actual war photography, using photos taken by the Hungarian living in France Robert Capa (1913-1954). This photographer had gained fame through the images he made very close to the front lines since the first weeks of the war in Spain. *Life* introduced

¹⁶ The magazine mentions, several times, that the murdered prisoners were of various nationalities. Similarly, this report is immediately followed by another one on the United Nations Conference on International Organization, which had begun in San Francisco on April 25, resulting in the drafting of the UN Charter, and this came to be signed by fifty nations.

¹⁷ *Life* magazine, May 7, 1945.

him as “one of the best photojournalists,” when photos he shot in the battle of Teruel, which took place in late December 1937, were published in this issue¹⁸.

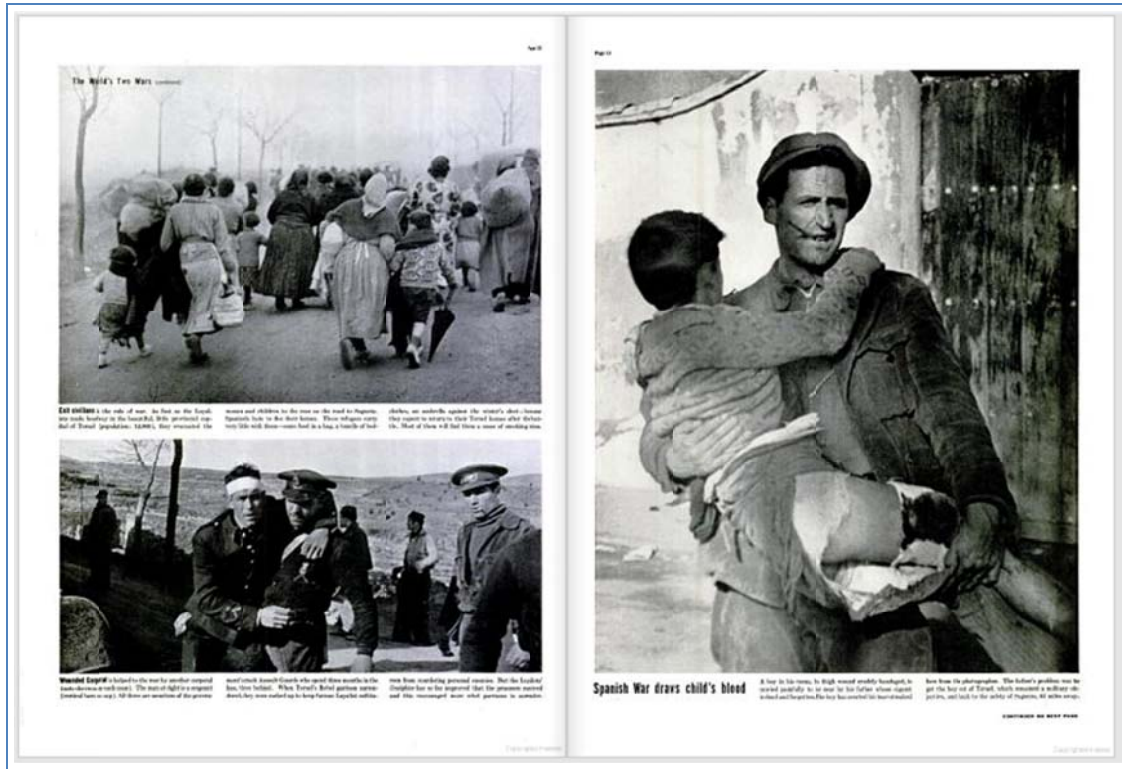


Image 13 – pages of Life magazine on January 24, 1938. Source:

https://books.google.com.br/books?id=yEoEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=twopage&q&f=false.

¹⁸ “Along with the armies in Germany, there were four photographers of LIFE, whose photos are displayed on these pages. The things they saw are horrible. They were published due to the reason given seven years ago when, by publishing recent photographs of dead people and destruction caused by the war in Spain and China, LIFE said: ‘The dead men have died in vain, indeed, if living man refuse to look at them!’”

The text of this report in January 1938 says: “Once again LIFE prints grim pictures of War, well knowing that once again they will dismay and outrage thousands and thousands of readers. But today’s two great continuing news events are two wars – one in China, one in Spain. (...) Obviously LIFE cannot ignore nor suppress these two greatest news events in pictures. As events, they have an authority far more potent than any editors’ policy or readers’ squeamishness. But LIFE could conceivably choose to show pictures of these events that make them look attractive. They are not, however, attractive events. The important thing that happens in a prize fight is that one man hits another. Only a picture of a blow shows a fight. The important thing that happens in a war is that something or somebody gets destroyed. Victory comes to the side that destroys the greatest number of somebodies and somethings. Pictures of war are therefore pictures of something or somebody getting destroyed. The pictures on these pages of the Spanish war were taken by one of the world’s best news photographers, Robert Capa. But even the best pictures cannot show war in all its horror and ugliness. They may depict some of the blood, some of the broken bodies, some of the violence and destruction but they leave unrecorded the terrible will to kill, the even more terrible will to live, the long lonely pain and the utter heartbreak of a whole people. No picture can convey the sounds that come from a thousand dead men. (...) The love of peace has no meaning or no stamina unless it is based on a knowledge of war’s terrors. Only then, by contrast, can the benefits and blessing of the absence of war be fully appreciated and maintained. Dead men have indeed died in vain if live men refuse to look at them!’” *Life* magazine, January 24, 1938.

In this double page, there are Capa's photos with some of the themes most frequently published by the anti-fascist press, such as the threat to the civilian population, causing waves of refugees and wounding women, elderly individuals, and children. Particularly, the picture in the right became very well known, and it is shown in the magazine prominently, occupying the whole page. On the previous page, both sides of the conflict are shown: a photograph of women and children forced to flee their households, walking on the road; and below a wounded Republican soldier being assisted by a colleague at the rear of the battle. The third photograph, bigger, appears just as a summary of the event. A father carries his son, wounded in the leg. The legend draws attention to the wound dressing improvised on the child's leg and the wound still bleeding, as well as the father's face expression, with a "cigarette unlit and forgotten" in the mouth.

There is predominance in the photos by Capa and other antifascist photographers of the 1930s, and especially those in the Spanish Civil War, of this look often named as humanist, which seeks to make anonymous individuals unique and distinguishes these men and women from the society structured in masses and advocating for the technique¹⁹. They bring only the effects caused by the invisible enemy, which is capable of the most barbarous destruction. The face they assign to the war is not that of weapons and combatants, but the face of these individuals, usually civilians and innocent individuals, who suffer from its terrible consequences. European left-wing artists and intellectuals have portrayed the Spanish Civil War as the model of an international struggle to preserve civilization, by fighting against Fascist barbarity. Since then the fight against international fascism has been turned by them into a struggle between the human and the inhuman, leaving no alternative but an equally international union of all forces in favor of life and civilization, against an enemy identified with a cold and

¹⁹ Tarot's biographer, Irme Schaber, also talks of this look that distinguishes individuals, in the work specific to this photographer – which seems to find an echo in Capa's photos, too: "Les photos de Gerda Taro, depuis celles du début, à Barcelone, jusqu'aux documents sur les combats de Brunete, témoignent de son effort pour montrer l'individu au sein de la masse et pour briser l'anonymat du nombre par le portrait d'individus isolés – cela vaut également pour les morts. Il répugnait à Taro d'accepter l'absurdité engendrée par les tapis de bombes de la machine de guerre moderne." SCHABER, Irme. **Gerda Taro, Une photographe révolutionnaire dans la guerre d'Espagne**. Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2006, pp. 206, 239.

destructive technology. And this enemy remains with no face, represented only by the destruction produced by its weapons.

Rodger's portraits of those women, which allow us to look at the perpetrators of Nazi crimes, are opposite to the photographic practice aligned to this humanist aesthetics that he had also followed until then.

They are portraits with models, instead of snapshots, since although they have different backgrounds and, therefore, they have been made in different locations, all of them were produced through the same camera position. In all cases (Images 9, 10, 11, and 12), the portrait is made in the foreground, from the middle torso upwards, with the portrayed women occupying almost the whole picture, which does not show any other element. The photographer positioned himself slightly from the bottom up, and slightly to the right. Almost all portrayed women look to the left, only one turns her eyes, but not her face, to the camera (Image 11). The relationship between the portrayed women's faces and the photo legends causes a different feeling in the observer. We are told that these women, at first sight normal, with no distinctive element, were members of the SS and worked in the field, taking responsibility for the barbarities that occurred there.

Through the formal options – closeness and aesthetic consistency – and the information provided by the legends – the occupation of these portrayed women, and in some cases their fame of cruelty – the photographer seems to demonstrate the intent of conducting at the same time an inventory and an investigation²⁰.

An inventory to the extent that these portraits refer us to the imagistic tradition of typological studies, records in the style of identification photographs. Allan Sekula stresses that the photographic portrait in the late 19th century occupied a significant position in the establishment of relations between the human body and society and to establish a pattern of normality and gradual deviations from this normality²¹. In the

²⁰ As Paul Lowe points out, other photographers have portrayed the perpetrators of these mass murders, but they are mostly military photographers, whose objectives and approach to the photographic language were different from Rodger's. LOWE, Paul. *Picturing the perpetrator*. In: **Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis**. Reaktion Books, London, 2012, pp. 2-6.

²¹ Sekula states: “[...] photographic portraiture began to perform a role no painted portrait could have performed in the same thorough and rigorous fashion. This role derived, not from any honorific portrait

decade before World War II, the German photographer August Sander made one of the most ambitious inventory projects through portrait. His intention was seeking the visible aspects of individuals as social types, i.e. “think of the historical world according to its human aspects” (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2014, pp. 79-80). In spite of the formal differences, in terms of framing, the portraits above seem to bring this look that seeks to evaluate a certain otherness, which highlights the particularity of individuals while seeking to extract from them a social characteristic.

Rodger’s portraits also seem to promote research. In his testimony quoted above, he states that what he saw at the Bergen-Belsen camp might be beyond the possibility of understanding, because it would be *quite contrary to all principles of humanity*. By producing these pictures, this kind of inventory, the photographer seems to look on those faces for any possibility of explanation to the death landscapes he have seen and photographed. They refer us to Walter Benjamin’s words, who says that “even the environment and the landscape only reveal themselves to the photographer who knows how to capture them in an anonymous expression, in a human face,” and the greatest example of this is Sander’s work: “more than a picture book, it is an atlas, where we can exercise ourselves” (BENJAMIN, 1996, pp. 102-103). Therefore, these portraits seem to propose a research on the very humanity of these people, who were able to commit such inhuman acts.

Final remarks

The possibility or impossibility of representing the reality of concentration camps, as well as that of providing an artistic production on the theme, and, ultimately, any cultural production after 1945, were and still are the subject of heated debates²².

tradition, but from the imperatives of medical and anatomical illustration. Thus photography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the *other*, to define both the *generalized look* – the typology – and the *contingent instance* of deviance and social pathology.” SEKULA, Allan. *The body and the archive*. October, vol.39, winter, 1986, p. 7.

²² Besides the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz, advocated by Adorno in 1949, see also the recent and heated debate between Georges Didi-Huberman and Claude Lanzmann about the possibility of representing the Shoah. ADORNO, Theodor. *Dialética negativa*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2009, p. 300; DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *Images Malgré Tout*. Paris: Minuit, 2003; LANZMANN, Claude. *A Lebre*

According to Cartier-Bresson, this challenge has created, to a certain extent, a new way of photography making, as well as a new understanding of the function of this domain. According to Rodger, the experience photographing Bergen-Belsen and, therefore, producing inevitably aesthetic images, was very costly in emotional terms and it has led to a personal and professional decision, i.e. stop photographing wars. Preferring to forget these photos for years, the photographer only returned to them in 1994, allowing their publication in the retrospective book of his career, *Humanity and inhumanity*²³.

After so many years, the photographers Bruce Bernard and Peter Marlow (1999), when editing Rodger's book, seem to have used just this wartime photography – particularly the photos in the Nazi concentration camp – as an axis in the long career of the photographer. By entitling the book as *Humanity and inhumanity*, they refer to the report written by Rodger in Bergen-Belsen and sent to *Life* magazine, as well as to the way he responded to the challenge of narrating something that, as he said, would be impossible to represent. Therefore, the portraits of female SS soldiers are a key part in the photographer's attempt to document and grasp the horror he saw. Just as the record of prisoners newly freed from the camps, made by Cartier-Bresson in video and photography. As said by Georges Didi-Huberman, these images seem to seek at the same time the creation of an archive and a testimony; a testimony to the extent it provides information, tell about the moment of its making, and an archive to the extent it is formed by parts that, constantly reassembled and recombined, can lead the past to be known²⁴.

da Patagônia. São Paulo: Cia das letras, 2011.

²³ In a 1995 interview, Roger provided one of his rare approaches to the subject: "The natural instinct as a photographer is always to take good pictures, at the right exposure, with a good composition. But it shocked me that I was still trying to do this when my subjects were dead bodies. I realized there must be something wrong with me. Otherwise I would have recoiled from taking them at all. I recoiled from photographing the so-called 'hospital', which was so horrific that pictures were not justified. ... From that moment, I determined never ever to photograph war again or to make money from other people's misery. If I had my time again, I wouldn't do war photographs." *Apud* NAGGAR, Carole. *op. cit.*, p. 140.

²⁴ In this way, Didi-Huberman says: "I believe, on the contrary, that the multiplication and the conjunction of images, however lacunary and relative they may be, constitute just as many ways of showing *in spite of all* what cannot be seen. The first and simplest way to *show* what escapes us is to *make a montage* of its figural detour by associating several views or several time periods of the same phenomenon." DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134.

Therefore, we can identify in the discourse underlying the photographic production by Cartier-Bresson e Rodger, during the last moments of World War II, closeness to the discourses produced at the immediately subsequent moments by intellectuals such as Arendt and Antelme – as seen in the beginning of this article. Such discourses refer directly to the notion of humanism. It is just this close contact between the visual discourse of these photographic works and the written discourse of the critical and historical works that allows us to talk about a close contact between visual culture and political culture in the images analyzed herein. In this way, they corroborate the notion of visual culture proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell (2002, p. 171), where this field of knowledge deals not only with the social construction of the visual field, but also with the visual construction of the social field.

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The human and the inhuman: visual culture, political culture, and the images produced by George Rodger and Henri Cartier-Bresson in the Nazi concentration camps

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