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Picturing the Perpetrator

There is considerable potential in examining images associated with atrocity that do not depict the actual act of violence or the victim itself, but rather depict the circumstances around which such acts occurred. Such images of the *absence* of visible violence can lead the viewer into an imaginative engagement with the nature of atrocity, and the nature of those who perpetrate it. In exploring this absence, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" can be taken to mean that the spaces in which atrocities take place are often nondescript, everyday and banal, and that the people who commit them may *appear* on the surface to be so as well, even if their interior motivations and rationales are far more complex than that they were simply following orders. Photography, with its optical -mechanical process, is adept at recording such banal facts of the scene, and, by inviting the viewer to scan the image for minute details, often generates a tension between such mundanities and the audience's knowledge of the potential import of the situation garnered via a caption. This strategy of the "aesthetics of the banal" has become a common one in contemporary photographic practice.¹ However, the idea that an image that appears on the surface to be of an ordinary scene or person but which the viewer then discovers contains another, deeper and more imaginative reading is one that has long been effective. In order to explore the possibility of an absence in the image being a key to understanding, it is useful to examine a constellation of images that gather around a key perpetrator of the

Holocaust, images that do not overtly show either the victims or the violence itself, but by the very absence of such evidence propel the viewer into an imaginative act of engagement with the nature of evil.

On April 15th 1945 a jeep containing soldiers of the advance party of the British 11th Armoured Division drove, almost by accident, through the gates of Bergen Belsen. What confronted the soldiers was a cauldron of human suffering and misery. One of the first officers to encounter the scene, Lt Col Leonard Berney, remembered that “None of us who entered the camp that day had any warning of what we were about to see or had ever experienced anything remotely like it before. People asked me, ‘What was it like?’ No words of mine could adequately describe the sights, the sounds, the stench, and the sheer horror of that camp, and I will not attempt to do so here.”² This failure of language to adequately represent the scene is repeated frequently in accounts of the liberation of the camps in 1945, most poignantly in Edward R. Murrow’s closing comment on his report from Buchenwald; “for most of it I have no words.”³

Language even proved inadequate to describe the images that emerged from the camps. As Ronald Tritton, Director of Public Relations at the War Office, wrote in his war diary on seeing them for the first time, “The Belsen pictures came in this evening -103 of them. They are so awful that words cannot describe them. I was almost physically sickened, and felt shaky and very upset.”⁴ Hannah Caven notes the impact the coverage of the camps had on the general

public, observing that when the photographs were shown in newspapers, magazines and public exhibitions, they “inspired a feeling of intense and profound shock almost universally among the people that they reached’ and that the ‘emphasis is on how unbelievable the scenes were, how no-one could have imagined what was now being witnessed.”⁵ At the time the photographs were emerging, the media engaged actively in the debate over how much to show, negotiating the level of atrocity to which the public should be exposed. The *Daily Telegraph* explained how it had censored itself as follows: “More than a dozen photographs each giving indisputable testimony of the bestial cruelties ... reached the Daily Telegraph yesterday; but they are of such a revolting nature that it has been decided not to reproduce them”⁶, whilst the *Daily Express* of the 21st of September accompanied two photographs of the dead and the survivors by asking “Has camera (sic) ever recorded such horror before? There was a companion picture to this, a death pit. That the Daily Express will not print....”⁷

In the news magazines, more graphic images were published. *Life* ran a six-page spread with close-up photographs of burned bodies that most magazines today would flinch from printing, and the *Illustrated London News* produced a removable four-page supplement which warned readers that “Our subscribers with young families, whom they would not desire to see the photographs, can remove these pages. These revelations of coldly-calculated massacre and torture are given as a record for all time of German crimes, and are intended for our adult readers only.”⁸

The bulk of the visual documentation of Bergen Belsen was produced by soldiers from a detachment of The No 5 Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPTU) that was tasked to document the situation, commanded by Captain Edward Malindine. The AFPTU soldiers were at the forefront of the Allied war effort; although a small unit, they suffered one of the highest ratios of casualties to size of any unit in the British army. At Belsen, Malindine and his team produced photographs that defined the event. Their images and films became, as Toby Haggith maintains, “arguably the most influential of any record or artefact documenting the Nazi concentration camps.”⁹

Malindine’s name has none of the fame or lasting memory of George Rodger, or Lee Miller or Margaret Bourke-White, the professional photojournalists who witnessed the liberation of the camps across Europe. But he was just as much a professional; he had worked for the *Daily Herald* as a press photographer before the war and returned to the paper afterwards. Although the photographs he made that day are 3x2 format, they are not in fact 35mm frames but rather 6x9 medium format roll film images; Malindine was using his Army issue Kodak Medalist camera, which took 8 photographs per roll. Before the war, he was known as a master of action and sports photography, using a 5x4 plate camera, and he carried this ability into his work during the conflict. Because he had so few frames, each one was carefully chosen to crystallise the essence of the situation into one telling image. The caption to this

photograph, which is held in the collection of the Imperial War museum, reads factually

THE LIBERATION OF BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP
1945 Josef Kramer, the camp commandant, photographed in irons at
Belsen before being removed to the POW cage at Celle. April 17 1945

Kramer was the former commandant of the gas chambers at the Auschwitz-Birkenau compound, and had taken command of Belsen in December 1944, where he was nicknamed the 'Beast of Belsen' by the inmates.



THE LIBERATION OF BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP,
APRIL 1945.

WAR OFFICE SECOND WORLD WAR OFFICIAL COLLECTION. *Josef Kramer, Camp Commandant, photographed in irons at Belsen before being removed to the POW cage at Celle. He was tried and executed for war crimes in December 1945. (Source IWM BU 3749)*

The image is beautifully composed, the arrangement of figures leading the eye from the central figure of Kramer -- clad in his droopy fatigues, and at this point in stockinged feet, the shackles binding them together highlighted against the sunlit cobbles -- to the stiffly marching officer on his left, in immaculately pressed uniform, peaked cap, polished boots and spats. Kramer is mirrored on the left by another soldier, again dressed for the parade ground, who points his rifle diagonally across the frame towards the prisoner. The uniforms of the guards can be identified as British of World War Two vintage, and the rifle is a Lee Enfield, again of the same period. Watching this spectacle are other soldiers, distributed across the background of the frame, filling the spaces of the composition with detail. Anchoring the far left of the frame, giving it solidity and balance, enclosing Kramer within, is the full stop of the wheel of a Willy's jeep, the ubiquitous symbol of allied mobility. The trees are bare of leaves, but the men are in shirtsleeves, so it can be deduced that it was probably taken in the Spring, and from the angle of sunlight in the late afternoon. The heart-shaped window in the door is characteristic of Mitteleuropa, potentially placing the image

somewhere in Central Europe. The whole image has an air of theatricality; the frontal nature of the photographer's position and the processional nature of the participants give a sense of a stage set, upon which the action is taking place. Some details can be made out that, given the import of the scene, seem strange: a pair of trousers hanging from the window of the building in the distance, positioned perfectly to balance the rest of the frame; the door just to the right of the officer is open, and inside can be seen a toilet bowl. Undercutting all the drama, the surreal detail of the WC is a reminder of the "banality of evil".

The photograph thus builds up its message cumulatively, all these small details of aesthetic and informational impact – under-laid with the banality of the background - come together to create a deeper and more significant reading than the mere facts of the caption might suggest. Equipped with the facts of who this man is and what he was responsible for, the image can be read both as evidence of the circumstances around the arrest of this particular individual, but also, in that Kramer was held up to be an archetype of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, to create a more expansive and symbolic reading.

The significance awarded to this image and to the other photographs that emerged from Belsen by the authorities is demonstrated by the following imperative in bold capitals and underlined at the top of the caption sheets that were circulated by the military at the time

'EXCLUSIVE. IT IS REQUESTED BY FIELD MARSHAL MONTGOMERY AND GEN. DEMPSEY THAT THESE PICTURES RECEIVE THE MAXIMUM PUBLICITY.'¹⁰

Although on their secret caption sheets or "dope sheets" the cameramen recorded clearly their perceptions that the majority of the inmates at Belsen were Jewish, by the time the reports reached the general public this fact had largely been censored from the material. His was largely the result of the attitudes of the British Ministry of Information and the Foreign Office who rarely mentioned Jews in their reports on the camps preceding the liberations.¹¹

This photograph and others of Kramer, including a head and shoulders portrait and an image of him being held prisoner, were widely reproduced both at the time and afterwards,¹² The image under discussion was cropped to a vertical showing Kramer and the officer immediately to his right and reproduced on the front page of the *Daily Express* on 21st of April, 1945. Under the headline "THE SHACKLED MONSTER OF BELSEN" the caption read

With fetters on his ankles and escorted by a British soldier- finger on trigger of revolver- S.S. Hauptsturmfureher Josef Kramer shuffles across the courtyard of the Death Camp at Belsen. It is he who has to answer for the horrors that are shown in pictures, today, on pages three and four. 'A

typical German Brute' General Dempsey's senior medical officer said of him 'A sadistical, heavy-featured Nazi – quite unashamed.' ¹³

As with the *Express*, it seemed to publications of the day that he encapsulated the nature of the Nazi mentality. A typical caption for another close-up picture of Kramer in the *Evening Standard* of the 18th April 1945 read

Look upon this evil face. It is the face of Josef Kramer. It is also the face of Nazi Germany for Kramer was commandant of Belsen. Now he is in the hands of the Allies. It is recorded that when he was taken 'he was unashamed'. ¹⁴

It is important to note here that many of these publications used racialised language, and encouraged the audience to attempt to find some significance from a close inspection of the facial characteristics of Kramer, with its "heavy features", as if from such an interrogation some insight into the nature of evil and atrocity might be gleaned. ¹⁵ As Caven observes

It is, however, hard to escape the fact that Kramer really does not look particularly unusual. He does not appear to have an unbelievably wicked look in his eye, nor does he look like some incarnation from a horror film. It is perhaps this that is important and the message that the papers were attempting to convey. It was the fact that ostensibly 'normal' people had

committed these crimes that made them so heinous and led to the warnings that it could happen again.¹⁶



THE LIBERATION OF BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP 1945:
PORTRAITS OF BELSEN GUARDS AT CELLE AWAITING TRIAL, AUGUST
1945. WAR OFFICE SECOND WORLD WAR OFFICIAL COLLECTION. *Irma
Grese standing in the courtyard of the Prisoner of War cage at Celle with Josef
Kramer. Both were convicted of war crimes and sentenced to death. (Source
IWM BU 9745)*

Kramer appears again in the archives of the No 5 AFPTU, this time as a prisoner in Celle awaiting trial, standing next to Irma Greese, one of the hated

women guards at Belsen. She served with Kramer at Auschwitz, and was a compatriot of the infamous Elizabeth Volkenrath, the head warden, accused of making lampshades from the skin of her victims, who together with Kramer was later given the sentence of "Tode durch den Strang", literally death by the rope. But in these images they look as if they are posing for a family snapshot like an uneasy married couple or even a father and daughter in front of their apartment, except that the garden is that of the prison and there is a watchful guard present too. Greese's clothing is at odds with the crimes of which she was accused; she looks more like an innocent schoolgirl than a participant in state-sponsored mass murder. Her clothes encase her with a suggestion of ordinariness, even domesticity, with her check skirt and pressed collar.

The image was one of a series taken by Sgt Silverside on the same day, the 8th of August 1945, in Celle. There are twenty or so portraits of the male and female guards from Belsen held awaiting trial, all set against the same plain background and in soft light, and almost certainly shot on the standard army issue Super Ikonta 2 ¼ camera, which carried an 80mm lens, giving a standard field of view. Because of this, the images are all head and shoulders rather than close-up headshots, which gives them a peculiar formality and consistency. These portraits occupy a complex space; taken as record photographs of prisoners awaiting trial for war crimes, they are essentially mug shots. The images invite the viewer to ponder the character and personality of the subject, the invitation that portrait photography makes. At the same time, these photographs are also reminiscent of police images, images that serve to control

and catalogue, in which the contemporary viewer perhaps extends the empathy of the oppressed to the subjects, seeing them as captured by state apparatus.



THE LIBERATION OF BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP 1945:
PORTRAITS OF BELSEN GUARDS AT CELLE AWAITING TRIAL, AUGUST
1945 Elizabeth Volkenrath: head wardress of the camp: sentenced to death. She
was hanged on 13 December 1945. (SOURCE IWM BU9689)

These portraits of the perpetrators hold a peculiar power. They appear almost like housewives with their extravagantly coiffured hairstyles. They seem typical of the “ordinary women” that Claus Christensen¹⁷ maintains became members of the SS, not because they had extraordinary backgrounds but who,

for a range of reasons, actively identified themselves with the ideology and goals of the Nazi regime. Their faces can be scanned for evidence of a predisposition to evil, but can it be found? What can be the reaction to discovering that the woman with the elaborate hairdo above is Elizabeth Volkenrath, head wardress of the camp? They therefore question our assumptions about the value of portraits.

There is a constellation of images around Kramer that have emerged, including those taken at his trial for war crimes in September 1995, but perhaps the most problematic of all appear in another snapshot album, much more disturbing and horrifying - the personal photographic diary of SS-Obersturmführer Karl Höcker. Höcker was the adjutant to the commandant of Auschwitz and documented his life and that of his comrades in the summer and autumn of 1944. The album was donated in 2007 to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington by an anonymous donor who had served as a US Army intelligence officer in occupied Germany after the war and discovered the photographs in an abandoned Frankfurt apartment.¹⁸ Many of the images were taken in the SS retreat of Solahutte some 30km outside of the camp, a visit to which was seen as a great reward for the guards at the camp.



Four SS officers socialise on the grounds of the SS retreat Solahutte outside of Auschwitz. Dr Josef Mengele, Rudolf Hoess (former commandant of Auschwitz) and Josef Kramer, commandant of Birkenau. The officer on the right is unidentified. (Source USNHM)

With their deckled edges, laid out often in sets of four to a page, the photographs show the daily life of the officers at Auschwitz in what appear to be happy times, drinking, singing, and cavorting with young secretaries. Höcker is seen playing with his Alsatian dog, and lighting candles on an enormous Christmas tree. Taken as a whole, the album serves as a chilling counterpart to the nostalgic, almost comforting domesticity of the visual evidence that preserves

the memory of the thousands of eradicated lives, and serves to illustrate what Slavoj Žižek has identified as the *jouissance* of the Nazis, their “surplus obedience” that seemingly manifested itself in enjoyment of the humiliation and murder of their victims.¹⁹ (1997, p69) And our antihero, Kramer, appears frequently too, as before he became the ‘Beast of Belsen’, he served in a litany of other camps, including Dachau and Auschwitz. This time he has the smartly pressed uniform, looking dapper and elegant in his tailored SS tunic, and flanked by senior members of the hierarchy of genocide, notably Dr Josef Mengele. It is a testament to the emotional power of the snapshot aesthetic that this collection is so repulsive; it bears all of the formal signifiers of happy domestic bliss, but is undercut with the absolute horror of imagining what these men did when they were not enjoying their RnR in this Nazi version of a holiday camp --the absence that lies again beyond the frame. This album and the images from Celle create what can be seen as a genre shift or slippage; they have all of the formal hallmarks of a particular type of photographic practice, the family album and family portrait, but their message is at odds with this form.

All of these images therefore do not provide answers but rather pose questions about how to interpret photographs and how to use them to think with, about how the photograph makes apparent the world outside of the frame, in terms of both temporality and physicality. The photograph becomes an imaginatively performative space, in the multivalent senses of the performance of taking the image, the choreography of photographer, subject and environment; in

terms of the production and dissemination of images in an ecology of meanings; and in terms of the invitation to the viewer to engage in a performative reading of the imaginative meanings of the image.

The parading of Kramer is staged, intentionally or not, as a procession; Malindine was able to position himself in the perfect position to record the scene; and the various soldiers in the scene are performing specific roles of captor, escort, onlooker, bystander and suspect. The prison portraits and the Höcker album create similar performative spaces, where the subject is paraded before the camera for description or parades itself before the camera in celebration. The viewer enters this space, and by the absence of evidence of atrocity and the presence of the knowledge that these people were responsible for it, is encouraged to speculate on the nature of evil. By oscillating between the evidential weight of the fixity of the specific moment and the generality of the broader reading, a performative space is generated in which the subject, photographer and audience collaborate to provide new interpretations. In the case of images of atrocity, perhaps those that do not show the act of violence itself but rather allude to it by depicting the perpetrator or the aftermath might engage our imaginations more successfully than those whose more graphic content simply repulses us.

¹ See Eugenie Shinkle “Boredom, repetition, inertia: contemporary photography and the aesthetics of the banal,” *Mosaic*: 37:4 (2004): 165-184 for an exploration of this concept.

² Leonard Berney, “The Liberation of Belsen Concentration Camp, a personal account,” *BBC2*, 2003

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/user/83/u747283.shtml>, accessed August 3rd, 2010.

³ Edward R. Murrow, *Transcript of his Report From Buchenwald for CBS*, transmitted April 15th 1945,

<http://www.otr.com/ra/450415%20CBS%20Edward%20Murrow%20On%20Buch%20enwald.mp3>, last accessed August 3rd 2010

⁴ Ronald Tritton, (1945) *War Diary*, 76, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁵ Hannah Caven, "Horror in Our Time: images of the concentration camps in the British media, 1945," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21: 3 (2001): 280.

⁶ Caven, 231.

⁷ *Daily Express*, September 21, 1945.

⁸ Caven, 231.

⁹ Toby Haggith, "The Filming of the Liberation of Bergen Belsen," *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, ed Susanne Bardgett, David Cesarani (London: Mitchell Vallentine & Co, 2006), 89.

¹⁰ Secret Caption sheet for images BU3722-BU 3823, April 19th 1945, Department of Photographs, Imperial War Museum, London.

¹¹ For more on the UK government's attitudes to the release of information about Jewish inmates of the camps during the war see Caven, 229.

¹² For example the image is reproduced on *Life* magazine's contemporary website as part of its gallery on WWII: Liberation of the Camps, where it is described as "Shocking" and captioned "The Beast of Belsen Under British Arrest: 'The Beast of Belsen,' Josef Kramer, is arrested by the British at Bergen-Belsen, April 1945. Of once killing 80 women, he said: 'I had no feelings in carrying out these things because I had received an order.'"

<http://www.life.com/image/83629138/in-gallery/22978/wwii-liberation-of-the-camps>

¹³ *Daily Express*

¹⁴ Caven, 230.

¹⁵ See for example the *Daily Express* of September 18, 1945, which ran the headline "The Beast Grins in Court" above a picture of Kramer on the first day of the War Crimes trial at Luneberg.

¹⁶ Caven, 230.

¹⁷ C. B. Christensen. "The women from Lublin: The guards of Majdenek," *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 106 (2006): 583–585.

¹⁸ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has a website devoted to the album at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/> where the entire set can be seen in context on scans of the pages from the album. There is also a podcast detailing the discovery of the album, entitled "Perpetrators at Play" <http://blogs.ushmm.org/index.php/COC2/481/>

¹⁹ Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 69.
