



PROJECT MUSE®

Air War and Dream: Photographing the London Blitz

Sharon Sliwinski

American Imago, Volume 68, Number 3, Fall 2011, pp. 489-516 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/aim.2011.0032](https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2011.0032)

AMERICAN
IMAGO

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
THE HUMAN SCIENCES

VOLUME 68 • NUMBER 3 • FALL 2011

➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aim/summary/v068/68.3.sliwinski.html>

Air War and Dream: Photographing the London Blitz

This paper treats Lee Miller's photographs of the London Blitz as a species of dream, which is to say, the Surrealist's images are regarded as a special form of thinking in which the conflicts and horrors of the times are represented in an effort to discharge their destructive force. This treatment calls upon Freud's discussion of dream-work, but also upon Didier Anzieu and Wilfred Bion's later writings, which consider the defensive and protective qualities of oneiric life. Miller's photography, like dream, provides a glimpse into the interior dimension of human existence. The essay argues that this interior dimension provides protection not only from inner psychological and biological traumas, but also from social and political aggression. In the era of air war, photography provides a powerful tool of civil defense.

"There is something unreal about this air war over Britain," Edward R. Murrow (1941) calmly remarks during one of his radio broadcasts in the early days of the London Blitz. "Much of it you can't see, but the aircraft are up in the clouds, out of sight" (p. 140). Murrow's struggle to convey this experience that has passed beyond human scale is one of the hallmarks of the journalist's work from this period. A month into the nightly bombings, for example, he describes the "freakish" nature of the damage inflicted by the unseen German planes: "A bomb may explode at an intersection and the blast will travel down two streets, shattering windows for a considerable distance, while big windows within a few yards of the bomb crater remain intact." He adds neutrally that the glass "generally falls into the street, rather than be blown inwards" (p. 146). One of the

An earlier version of this paper was given at the international colloquium *Imaginaires du présent: Photographie, politique et poétique de l'actualité* at the Université du Québec à Montréal. The paper is supported by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant called "Dream Matters: The social and political significance of dream-life."

broadcasts was delivered from the mouth of an air raid shelter near Trafalgar Square while sirens wail in the background. Another was recorded in whispered tones because “three or four people are sleeping on mattresses on the floor” of Murrow’s studio (p. 167).

The American journalist mesmerized radio listeners back home with his detailed daily accounts of the air war being waged across the Atlantic. The broadcasts did more than simply offer headline news to American audiences. They also attempted to convey what life felt like in the city under siege: the unassuming bravery of ordinary citizens, new pressures brought by the war measures, the eerie silence left in the streets after the evacuation of the children, the way the British class system found a new venue of expression in the nightlife of bomb shelters.

But as the Blitz stretched into weeks and then into months, Murrow became more and more preoccupied with imparting what he called the war’s “unreality.” The air war pushed the broadcaster’s canny powers of description to the limit. On 20 September, he delivered one of his most surreal accounts. As usual, the evening radio program was broadcast to Americans from the middle of England’s night, in this case, at three-thirty in the morning London time:

The scale of this air war is so great the reporting of it is not easy. . . . We’ve read you the communiqués and tried to give you an honest estimate of the wounds inflicted upon this, the best bombing target in the world. But the business of living and working in this city is very personal—the little incidents, the things the mind retains, are in themselves unimportant, but they somehow weld together to form the hard core of memories that will remain when the last “all clear” has sounded. That’s why I want to talk for just three or four minutes about the things we haven’t talked about before; for many of these impressions it is necessary to reach back through only one long week. . . . One night I stood in front of a smashed grocery store and heard dripping inside. It was the only sound in all London. Two cans of peaches had been drilled clean through by flying glass and the juice was dripping down onto the floor.

There was a flower shop in the East End. Nearly every other building in the block had been smashed. There was a funeral wreath in the window of the shop—price: three shillings and six pence, less than a dollar. In front of Buckingham Palace there's a bed of red and white flowers—untouched—the reddest flowers I've ever seen (pp. 172–173).

It is difficult to grasp the extra-ordinariness of these eventide impressions. After months of straightforward, realist coverage, the most potent means to convey the “unreality” of the Blitz arrived in the sound of dripping peach juice, the sight of a funeral wreath in a shop window, and mesmerizingly red flowers in the Palace gardens. Perhaps the best that can be said of this strange, composite picture of London circa September 1940 is that after weeks of terrifying night raids, Murrow found himself in the middle of a dream.

The American's determined attempt to grasp, indeed, to picture that which was occurring around him makes these radio broadcasts one of the more remarkable records of civilian experience of air war. They testify to one of the most disquieting ideas to emerge during this period of human history: a belief that the most effective way of waging war involved the obliteration of civilian life through air attack. Although the dream of Total War has existed for centuries (its roots sown during the Napoleonic Wars), this particular doctrine took on new potency in the 1930s with the development of aerial bombardment technology. As the Italian general and theorist of air power Giulio Douhet (1943) realized, “aeroplanes” would utterly transform the future of war by transforming the location of the front. The technical evolution effectively erased the distinction between soldiers and civilians: “Nothing man can do on the surface of the earth can interfere with a plane in flight, moving freely in the third dimension” (p. 14). And of life on the ground, Walter Benjamin in “The Story Teller” (1936) would lament: “A generation that had gone to school on horse drawn street cars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in the field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny fragile, human body” (p. 144).

The new terrors from above had a particularly devastating effect on the field of the aesthetic. In his Zurich lectures, "Air War and Literature," W.G. Sebald (1999) describes the perplexing literary silence surrounding the destruction of German cities and towns in the later half of the Second World War. Some six hundred thousand German civilians were killed by Allied air raids—ten times that of British civilian casualties—and another seven and a half million people were left homeless. German cities themselves suffered unparalleled physical destruction.¹ And yet, as Sebald notes, there was a "tacit agreement, equally binding on everyone, that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described." The destruction of the German cities—a destruction that was experienced by the great majority of the population—remained, Sebald marvels, "under a kind of taboo like a shameful family secret, a secret that perhaps could not even be privately acknowledged" (pp. 10–11).² The destruction wrought from above was therefore both unimaginable and unspeakable. This air war transfigured the dimensions of the battlefield and simultaneously shattered the human capacity to communicate. It left its victims bereft of that which seems most inalienable, ruining the securest among our human possessions: the ability to convey experience.

From this terrible field of torrents and explosions, it may be easier to grasp Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological claim that the body is "wholly psychic" and not a merely anatomical thing (1943, p. 305). Sartre's insight, of course, is borrowed from Sigmund Freud, who two decades prior in *An Outline of Psycho-analysis* insisted in more prosaic terms that the supposedly somatic phenomena are the truly psychological things (1940 [1938], p. 157). Transposing this idea, one could say that air war's threat to bodies and the built environment is in fact an aggressive attack on the psyche. The primary target of air war—indeed perhaps of all violence—is the human mind. This is evidenced, as Sebald observes, by the fact that literature was among the collateral damage of air war in Germany. This new form of technological violence ravaged one of the crucial forums and networks for sharing human experience. It targets our most intimate modes of thinking and being.

Yet while some of the established aesthetic forms fell under siege with the deployment of this new technology, other forms arose in response. Perhaps akin to the way resistance assumes myriad forms depending on who and what is being fought against, the artistic community found new venues of expression. In particular during this period, photography emerged as one of the chief styluses for recording what could not be written otherwise. In the early years of air war, this medium became one of the most potent tools for communicating the new landscapes of emotional life, the new states of mind created by this terrible force that targeted civilian life and yet effectively remained “out of sight.” In response to this aggressive attack on the mind, photography offered a special form of defense by representation. Indeed, like Didier Anzieu’s (1989) notion of “the film of the dream,” photography involves a sensitive surface capable of registering perceptual traces and impressions. These impressions, in turn, can be developed into images endowed with an illusory reality that can help fill the holes that air war attempts to rip in the fabric of human experience. In short, against this innovative form of terror, photography became one of the civilian’s best defenses.

In this paper, then, the aesthetic field—and photography in particular—is treated as a species of dream. That is, photography is regarded as a special form of thinking in which the conflicts and horrors of the times are represented in an effort to discharge their destructive force. This treatment derives from two, interrelated psychoanalytic insights. First, it draws from Freud’s repeated insistence that dreaming is simply another “form of thinking,” that a dream is a thought like any other (1900, p. 506n, added in 1925). In part, this was Freud’s way of shifting and narrowing the aim of analytic work. As he developed his technique, uncovering the latent content of his patients’ oneiric reports became less significant than attending the specifics of the dream-work. Freud was acutely aware that dream thoughts could be influenced by the process of analysis, and indeed, are shaped by each dreamer’s unique lived context and circumstances—which is why he once wryly cautioned an interlocutor that working with the dreams of historical figures without access to the dreamer’s associations, “gives, as a general

rule, only meagre results” (1929, p. 203). But Freud realized that the mechanism of dream formation—the dream-work—is free from such influence. He regularly insisted that a true understanding of this “form of thinking” could only be achieved by an appreciation of dream’s dizzying arsenal of disguises and distortions (1914, p. 65). Dream-work provided Freud his own theory of aesthetics. And as his later literary essays show, this theory can, in turn, be used to analyze the “work” involved in a broad range of aesthetic productions.³

The second insight is more specific and its conceptualization developed in part from what Freud (1920; 1925[1924]) called *Reizschutz*—a protective shield for the mind. In framing his theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud conjured an image of a specialized apparatus that envelops the organism, filtering external stimuli that would otherwise overwhelm the delicate interior organs of the psyche. Extending that concept to dreams, later theorists and analysts have elaborated how the modality of visible images projected onto the dream screen possesses facilitating and defensive properties (Flanders, 1993; Schneider, 2010). More specifically, a dream is thought to provide a visual buffer that can double as a protective shield to traumatic overwhelming. As Anzieu (1989) describes, dreams weave a new psychical skin that can reinforce an ego whose defenses are embattled or defective. Or in a more quotidian sense, the “film of the dream” does the nightly work of repairing the small ruptures in the skin ego that are implicit in daily functioning. Such elaborations of dream theory lend a new, broader significance to oneiric life, perhaps in particular in times of social or political crisis. These fragile visual membranes, so quick to break and dissipate, do the work of protecting the psyche from excitations coming from the external world which would threaten to destroy the mind with their intensity.

One of the questions this paper pursues is whether aesthetic products also harbour this protective function, if they, too, can provide a kind of *Reizschutz* for the mind. In this respect, Freud himself provides reasons to make the connection between photography and dream. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he made a direct comparison between the psychical apparatus and optical instruments such as the camera (1900, p. 536). Indeed, this

became one of his favorite metaphors, one that he returned to repeatedly, the last time in *Moses and Monotheism*. Here he notes that early experiences possess special significance because the child's psyche is not yet fully developed; early impressions are like "a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture . . . What children have experienced at the age of two and have not understood, need never be remembered by them except in dreams" (1939 [1934–38], p. 126). Photography, like dream, is a method for processing difficult stimuli. The camera filters external excitations, capturing information in small samples. This breaking down of the mass stimuli is usually followed by some kind of darkroom-work, where the initial impressions are edited and developed into positive pictures. Like any metaphor, the comparison is not perfect. Photography perhaps fails to convey the conflicted character of the psyche; it cannot show the extent of the forces that have an interest in allowing or prohibiting certain images to enter consciousness. But despite the flaws, it is not hard to see why photography provided Freud one of his favourite illustrations of psychic process.⁴

In less technical terms, my gambit here is to explore how the photography of air war offers a glimpse into the interior, imaginary regions of human existence. This glimpse is significant, because as Julia Kristeva (2010) has recently reiterated, it is this interior dimension that ultimately allows us to shield ourselves from attacks on our being – not only from inner psychological and biological traumas, but also from external forms of social and political aggression: "The imaginary metabolizes them, transforms them, sublimates them, works-through them and in this way keeps us alive" (2010, p. 20). Kristeva's notion of the imaginary refers to the fantasies and dreams that psychoanalysis is familiar with, but to also aesthetic forms such as literature.⁵ Here this imaginary plane is expanded to include photography.

This paper focuses on those who wielded this medium as a means of civil defense in the early days of air war. This past moment has become significant again, not least because the idea of obliterating a civilian population via the "third dimension" reached one kind of climax on September 11, 2001, when airplanes themselves became the bomb and the front, when

the indiscriminate destruction of civilian life could itself occur “up in the clouds, out of sight” as Edward Murrow might have said. Whereas much of the event known as 9/11 unfolded *as* an image, it inaugurated, as many have noted, a crisis in the notion of the imaginary itself (Mondzain, 2009). This recent disaster—what has been called the most photographed event in history—has sparked much reflection on the relation between air war and the visible, and specifically, that most vexed means of producing and reproducing the visible domain, namely photography. In this paper, then, the imaginary is taken as an essential component of psychical life, but also as a key mode of civil defense in the modern era of Total War. Indeed, if this form of warfare seeks to obliterate civilian life, then one could go so far as to say that this imaginary plane has become the real front.

The Guardians of Sleep

The first substantial expression of modern air war occurred when Germany’s Luftwaffe Condor Legion—under direct orders from Lieutenant Colonel Wolfram von Richthofen and assisted by a few Italian planes—bombed a small Basque town in northern Spain late in the day on April 26, 1937. The market town of Guernica provided a prime target for Germany to test out its new air war capabilities. This preliminary military exercise helped the Nazis develop their *Blitzkrieg* tactic. In addition to the incendiary bombs that ravaged the town’s centre, machine guns took fleeing civilians as their target. Remarkably, news of the attack reached international audiences almost immediately. *The Times* carried a front-page report by George Steer on April 27 and photographers were immediately dispatched to capture images of the destruction. One of these pictures even manages to capture flames still licking through the remains of Guernica’s marketplace (Fig. 1). On April 28, photographs of dead women and children were published in the Communist paper *L’Humanité*. By April 30, the images of the bombed-out town appeared in a variety of Parisian papers, including *Le Figaro* and *Ce Soir*, which Pablo Picasso was known to have read.



Figure 1. Guernica, bombed by the German legion Condor, 1937. Imagno/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

His first sketches for his now-famous *Guernica* mural date from May 1 (Picasso, 1995, p. xi; Patterson, 2007).

In an anti-war essay written during the time, Virginia Woolf describes receiving a package of these pictures in the morning's post. She reports that one photograph shows dead children. Another shows a section of a house: "A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in mid-air" (1938, p. 125). When Woolf looks at these pictures, her feelings become unequivocal: "some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations

are the same . . . the same words rise to our lips. War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped” (p. 125). Like Picasso, the pictures arouse a potent moral response in Woolf, opening an imaginary plane from which an unequivocal voice finds expression.⁶

One could read such aesthetic encounters as exemplars of what Jacques Ranci ere (2009) calls the “redistribution of the sensible,” that is, new organizations of the sensory world that reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and thought. If air war wreaked damage from “the third dimension,” photography was called upon to combat this violence through its networks of distribution, its capacity to generate an international alignment of witnesses, to offer a venue for the world spectator’s shock, censure, and grief. There is much to be said, in other words, about the relation between the new violence wrought from above and photography’s ability to help weave a new community of aesthetic judgement—a *sensus communis*—from below.

But beyond journalistic expos e, photography also served as a special instrument for describing the *inward* effect of the outward destruction wrought by air war. In this respect, Edward R. Murrow was not alone in his presentation of the London Blitz as a dreamscape. The photographer, lapsed Surrealist, and former *Vogue* cover girl, Lee Miller, similarly turned up in London on the eve of this “People’s War” and she too was captivated by and sought to capture the city’s “unreal reality.”

Miller landed in London in June 1939 to join her lover, the painter and Surrealist promoter, Roland Penrose. By the end of the summer the pair were visiting Picasso in France, but returned to England once news that Hitler had invaded Poland broke at the beginning of September. They arrived back in London just in time to hear the first air raid sirens and watch the enormous gray, anti-aircraft balloons rise into the sky. It would be another year, however, before Hitler’s *Blitzkrieg* reached English shores. The *F uhrer* authorized an all-out assault on the British capital beginning on September 6, 1940. London was bombed for 76 consecutive nights. By the end of May 1941, some 43,000 civilians, half of them Londoners, had been killed in one of the longest city sieges in modern times.

As an American, Lee Miller was prevented from joining the thousands of women who enlisted in the auxiliary forces,

so she kept busy working as a staff photographer for British *Vogue* magazine. Already an established commercial photographer, the Blitz returned Miller to her Surrealist sensibilities, cultivated years earlier by a Paris circle that included Man Ray, Paul Éluard, and Jean Cocteau. During the war, Miller made a daily trek between her home near Hampstead Heath and *Vogue's* downtown Bond Street offices, winding through the London streets and recording the most arresting sights exposed by the night's bombings. Her pictures, like Murrow's reports, took cognizance of how the cityscape was arranged and rearranged each night like so much dream furniture.

Some of the photographer's images found their way into the public sphere in 1941 when, together with several dozen other British press photographs, they appeared in a slim book called *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*, published in the U.S. under the title *Bloody But Unbowed*. (A smaller group was also published in British *Vogue* in 1941). Designed to complement Murrow's broadcasts—he also wrote a small preface—the book was a deliberate propaganda effort aimed at shifting U.S. sentiment toward intervention. As the publishers write in their forward, the book is “the expression of a feeling.” More specifically, it attempts to convey the “heroic, exasperated, resolute, muddle-headed, defiant, insensitive—in a word, *English*—behaviour of ordinary people under the most prolonged intensive battering ever inflicted on civilians” (Carter, 1941, n.p.). But like Murrow's radio broadcasts, Miller's contributions to this book are concerned more with conveying the surprising *unreality* of the bombings. This is to say, her pictures show less interest in transmitting a heroic English mentality than in capturing the uncanny laws of blast. Perhaps because of their outsider status—both were Americans—Miller and Murrow remained attuned to the widespread efforts to manufacture national sentiment. Rather like the dreamer who struggles to find a way to describe the foreign territory of the dream, Miller and Murrow occupied the position of outside recorder, transcribing the strange unreality in which they found themselves immersed. But beyond a journalist record of the destruction, their work, each in its own way, took on the central function Freud gave to dreams: to serve as the guardians of sleep. As Londoners grew more and more fearful of the terrors that night might bring,

Miller and Murrow generated more and more fantastic images, both verbal and pictorial, pressing the day residues through fantasy operations in a way that attempted to give expression to the emotional needs and desires of the civilian population.

Dotted throughout *Grim Glory*, Miller's pictures dominate a section of the book called "The Ironies of War." There is a brief textual introduction to the section: "If all that one saw was unrelieved tragedy life would be unendurable in these besieged cities. Fortunately, the wanton behaviour of explosives and blast occasionally produces effects that are ironical, freakish, beautiful and sometimes even funny, although the irony is grim and the humour threaded through with pathos" (Carter, 1941, n.d.). The dozen or so pictures in this section mobilize all these literary tricks and add something more. Miller has a gifted eye for capturing composites; indeed, she armed herself with all the techniques of dream-work: displacement, condensation, considerations of representability, and secondary revision. Through her lens, for instance, a half-blown up building in Knightsbridge becomes a metonym of the Venetian "Bridge of Sighs" (Fig. 2). One can imagine floating along



Figure 2. Lee Miller, 'Bridge of Sighs,' Lowndes Street, Knightsbridge, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.

the Rio di Palazzo in a gondola under this famous arch. In another, Miller pictures the door of a church that is spewing bricks from its innards, as if the entranceway had been caught mid-regurgitation. Through an inspired use of captioning the menacing sight is transfigured into a Nonconformist Chapel (Fig. 3). The dazzling interplay of visual and linguistic symbolic forms transforms the spectator's view of these chaotic ruins into an organized agitation for religious liberty, a principled refusal of the tenants of the old church.

On the same role of film, Miller pulled back to capture a long shot of the same scene. Here the vomiting doorway is viewed awry and all that remains of the larger building are several enormous pillars (Fig. 4). The caption reads like one of Julia Child's recipes: "1 Nonconformist Chapel + 1 bomb = Greek Temple." The composition calls for a new thesis about the end of empire, or about the potent survival and return of antiquity—or perhaps the picture simply offers itself up as a site for contemplating the human fascination with ruins. If dreams represent desire fulfilled, here Miller remakes London into Venice and Athens. That is to say, through the imaginary mechanisms of dream-work, bombs do not just destroy but can, incongruously, add cultural value and new tourist destinations to the city.

At times Miller displays a quirky knowledge of art history, as in "Baroque made rococo" (Fig. 5). In this image a gentleman in formal dress provides a scale for the massive, melted "rococo" candelabrum in the window. The man's smile, caught in the instant of its unfolding, offers a mirror for our own reaction, which is to say, Miller invites the spectator to share in this joke. In a 1927 paper, Freud expanded on his early thesis that jokes yield pleasure because they economize affect. Where a situation might normally call for the expression of anger, frustration, pain, or terror, a good joke saves on this expenditure of feeling. Freud even risks a joke in his short paper to illustrate: a criminal who is being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarks: "Well, the week's beginning nicely" (1927, p. 161). Humor liberates because it denies the arrows of reality, it refuses to submit to suffering, and thereby preserves us some measure of dignity. The gravest wounds of the world can become occasions for laughter.



Figure 3. Lee Miller, Non-conformist chapel, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.



Figure 4. Lee Miller, The bombed ruins of the Non-conformist chapel, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.



Figure 5. Lee Miller, Baroque made rococo, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.

Sometimes Miller angles her humor deliberately toward her colleagues' gratification. Before she found a place for them in the book, Miller hung her pictures up on the walls of *Vogue's* Bond streets offices, inserting one of her contributions among the mock-ups for the next issue: "Fashion-note: Lampposts are worn cock-eyed this year in smart Belgravia" (Fig. 6). Here is Miller's creative dream logic at its best: in her hands, a grotesquely twisted lamppost becomes delicate *haute couture*.

In one shot, Miller provides visual illustration of Sebald's thesis about air war's effects on language (Fig. 7). "Remington Silent" plays on the name of a well-known typewriter of the time, but here its keys are literally mute. The pictorial image now stands in for the traditional means of signifying experience through words. In itself a silent medium, the photographic image manages to testify to how the invention of air war crippled traditional means of communication. As Miller's son, Anthony



Figure 6. Lee Miller, 'Lamp posts to be worn cock-eyed in Belgravia this year,' London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.



Figure 7. Lee Miller, Remington Silent, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.

Penrose, proposes: “the shattered machine taps out an eloquent essay on the war’s assault on culture” (1985, p. 103). Miller mobilizes surrealism’s penchant for found objects and ironic juxtaposition. As in dream, even ruined artifacts can take on a renewed meaning.

This surreal record of the London Blitz surely calls for reflection. Treated as historical testimonies, Miller’s photographs and Murrow’s broadcasts offer a startling thesis: one of the most pivotal political moments from the last century was best captured and conveyed to distant audiences in terms of a dream. Nazi ideology presumed that their program of air war would compel Londoners to rise up and demand a new government, one that would submit to or make peace with Germany, as most countries of Europe had done already.⁷ And yet, in this “People’s War” one of the civilian’s best defenses against this brand of terrorism appeared to be dream-work. Does this fact not beg new questions about the significance of this psychological process in relation to social and political aggression, about the profound importance of these interior, imaginary activities which can shield us from attacks on our being? If Fascist regimes seek to “aestheticize political life,” as Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” (1936) famously proposed, perhaps Miller’s photographs and Murrow’s radio broadcasts reveal a profound site of resistance in their use of dream-life. Indeed, perhaps this special “form of thinking” offers one of our most important modes of defense.

Dreaming and Thinking

Since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the mysterious thoughts that come to us while we are asleep have been regarded as paradigmatic of the unconscious and central to a psychoanalytic theory of mind. In his *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud reiterated that with the discovery of the laws that govern dreams, and specifically the dream-work, “analysis took the step from being a psychotherapeutic procedure to being a depth psychology” (1933 [1932], p. 7). And while much of the classical theory of dream interpretation has remained intact, there have been numerous revisions and expansions over the

years, including Freud's own grappling with traumatic dreams in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This post-war text marks the first time that Freud openly addressed the problem that some dreams seem "impossible to classify as wish fulfilments" (1920, p. 32). He initially regarded wish-fulfilling and anxiety dreams as "independent" (Levy, 2011), but Sándor Ferenczi extended and opened that view by defining every dream as "an attempt at a better mastery and settling of traumatic experiences, so to speak, in the sense of an *esprit d'escalier*" (1931, p. 238). Freud appeared to add his tacit agreement when he asserted that no one escapes the traumas of childhood experience that return to us in our dreams (1932, pp. 27–30). Infancy is a time of nameless dreads and the predominance of visual imagery in dreams perhaps speaks most clearly to the idea that their central purpose is to bind anxiety, or to use more contemporary terms, to work through otherwise unspeakable mental pain.

Dream theory after Freud has both extended this reading and yet remained faithful to the early manual. Part of this evolution can be characterized as a shift of emphasis: from a focus on interpretation toward a renewed questioning of what sort of object a dream is and what psychological functions it serves. The work of two more recent thinkers on these questions—Wilfred Bion and Didier Anzieu—can perhaps help elucidate what Miller and Murrow's representations of the London Blitz achieved, how their interventions into the imaginary provided a unique form of defense against the Nazis' instrument of air war and its attacks on civilian life.

British analyst Wilfred Bion, born just before the turn of the century, had his own particular intimacy with Total War, having served as a tank commander in France from 1917–1919. His *War Memoirs* (1997), are filled with accounts of being flattened to the ground by the force of exploding shells, warnings about the distance at which the splinters can kill (800 yards), and vivid descriptions such as an eerie valley filled with demolished tanks that bore gaping, blackened holes, a "terrible sight . . . too horrible to look at" (p. 25). Bion also recorded the crippling psychological effects of these experiences that produced "nightmares out of which one started up suddenly with sweat pouring down one's face" (p. 94). In this respect, the *Memoirs* graphically illustrate one of the most dangerous

aspects of Total War – the way a subject can lose the capacity to “distinguish dream from reality”:

The tat-tat-tat of the German machine-guns would chime in with your dream with uncanny effect, so that when you awoke you wondered whether you were dreaming. The machine-gun made you think everything was genuine, and only by degrees you recovered yourself to fall into uneasy sleep again.

It didn't take long for interest in life to die out. Soon I found myself almost hopeless. I used to lie on my back and stare at the low roof. Sometimes I stared for hours at a small piece of mud that hung from the roof by a grass and quivered to the explosion of the shells . . . This may seem hardly possible to you. But the fact remains that life had now reached such a pitch that horrible mutilations or death could not conceivably be worse. I found myself looking forward to getting killed, as then, at least, one would be rid of this intolerable misery (p. 94).

Perhaps it was this proximity to madness that compelled Bion to regard the dream as a form of emotional achievement. Even a nightmare, he once proposed, represents a kind of freedom compared to being caught, confined to “the pale illumination of daylight” (1991, p. 239).

Once he entered psychoanalytic training after the war, Bion began to treat dream-life as a particularly important state of mind. Like Freud, he never tired of pointing out to his readers that just because this state of mind changes—just because we happen to “wake up”—does not mean that the significance of the sights, journeys, and “stray thoughts” that come to us in dreams should be dismissed. Among his various essays, memoirs, and lectures, Bion's concise book *Learning from Experience* elevates the significance of dreams by treating them as a central model of thinking, or more specifically, as a central model of the *capacity* for thinking. Building on Melanie Klein's description of unconscious phantasies as the structuring agents of the internal world, Bion proposed that dreaming provides a key emotional function. Dreams serve as an indispensable mental space or “container” in which to think and elaborate

symbolically. In this view, dreaming is something much more than a process for allaying psychic tension in order to maintain sleep, as Freud initially imagined. Here dreaming becomes the exemplary form of unconscious thinking about emotional experience, a heightened form of communication with one's internal objects. Interpretation of this communication is less significant in Bion's view; narrating one's dreams is simply a kind of publishing of the symbolic work that has already taken place. Furthermore, for Bion, the dream's working-through of emotions and sense impressions does not differ significantly from the psychical processing occurring during waking life. This is to say the British theorist regarded nocturnal dreams as exemplars that illustrate the larger activity of *dream-life*, a mode of functioning which is going on all the time, whether we are asleep or awake (Meltzer, 1983).

Perhaps most significant for present purposes, Bion proposed that the dreams provide a "contact-barrier" that simultaneously separates external reality from internal fantasy *and* generates a point of safe passage between these two realms (1962, p. 15). In this respect, the analyst stayed close to classical theory, in which dreams carry the function of censorship and resistance, or help to preserve the "protective shield" against elements that, if allowed to penetrate into consciousness, would overwhelm and dominate the mind. In a rare example from *Learning from Experience*, Bion describes a man having a conversation with a friend (1962, pp. 15–16). In the course of this everyday interaction, the man must convert the sense impressions and raw facts that arise during the conversation into emotionally digested thoughts. (In Bion's terms, he must convert raw "beta-elements" into digested "alpha-elements"). Thanks to something akin to a dream—or a membrane-like contact barrier—the man can continue uninterruptedly to be "awake" to the fact he is talking to his friend, but "asleep" to impressions that would disturb his capacity for thought: "The dream," Bion writes, "makes a barrier against mental phenomenon which might overwhelm the patient's awareness that he is talking to a friend, and, at the same time, makes it impossible for awareness that he is talking to a friend to overwhelm his phantasies" (1962, p. 15). The mind needs protection, Bion proposes, even in normal, daily functions, like conversing with

a friend. Dream is the exemplary model, the prototype of this protective shield for the mind.

The work of the French analyst Didier Anzieu expands this conceptualization of the dream as a “contact-barrier.” In his influential book *The Skin Ego*, Anzieu (1989) elaborates what he calls “the film of the dream.” He uses the French term *pellicule* to designate two distinct functions of this psychological object. First, the film of the dream works like the fine membranes or skin that protects and envelops certain parts of plant and animal organisms. In its second function, it acts in the same way as the film used in photography and cinema: as the thin plastic layer that serves as base for the sensitive coating that will receive the visual impression (1989, p. 210). Like Bion, Anzieu regards the dream as a protective shield *and* as an impressionable surface, capable of registering mental images that are often visual in nature. Anzieu imagines these impressions can be strung together in an animated sequence, like we see in the cinema: “The film may be defective, the reel may get stuck or let light in, and the dream is erased. If everything goes well, we can on waking develop the film, view it, re-edit it or even project it in the form of a narrative told to another person” (1989, p. 211). Anzieu’s adaptation also keeps close to classical dream theory, especially in the way Freud initially asked us to picture the psychic apparatus as an optical instrument. Anzieu manages to carry this metaphor of the mind in his description of dream as *pellicule*.

What is particularly significant about *The Skin Ego* is Anzieu’s notion that the purpose of the dream is to repair our psychic skin. Mending is required not only because of the dangers that the mind faces at night—a personality can come apart during sleep—but also from the encroachments one suffers during waking hours. This thesis helps fill in Kristeva’s (2010) claim that the imaginary provides a shield for attacks on our being. In Anzieu’s view, the ubiquitous, nightly occurrence of dreaming serves the vital, diurnal function of reconstructing our psychic “envelope,” filling in the narcissistic wounds that pierce the fragile ego on a regular basis.

One can imagine the heightened need for this dream-film in times of social and political crisis such as the London Blitz. If anxiety works as a first defense—a defense by affect, protect-

ing its subject against fright—then the dream-film provides a second kind of defense: a defense by representation. Whether produced by a serious trauma or by an accumulation of micro-traumas, the holes in the ego are transposed by the work of representation to locations where the scenario of the dream can then unfold. In this process the holes can be sealed, filled in by the film of images: “The dream-film,” Anzieu proposes, “represents an attempt to replace a deficient tactile envelope with a visual envelope, both finer and flimsier, but also more sensitive: the protective shield function is re-established *a minima*; the function of the inscription of traces and their transformation into signs is, by contrast, intensified” (1989, pp. 214–5). But as Freud proposed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and as any number of war memoirs (including Bion’s own) corroborate, it is precisely this fundamental aspect of mental functioning that can break down during the successive shocks of modern warfare.⁸ It is a mistake to think the incendiaries of war only aim to breach the armour that shields human bodies. This violence also targets the fragile membranes of the mind. And in such times of crisis, the dream-film—that sensitive, flimsy visual envelope—provides one of the last lines of defense.

Lee Miller’s photographic work throughout the Blitz provides but one example of the expanded aesthetic field where this important defense by representation, a special form of symbolic repair, can occur. Among the most disturbing aspects of air war is surely the uncanny laws of blast. Bombs render relatively ordered city space into chaotic masses of debris. They can, of course, do the same to bodies.⁹ Simply passing through London’s streets on any given morning during this period might have meant coming into contact with an unusually intense array of sensations and raw sense impressions—in Bion’s terms, “beta-elements”—that required digestion in order for the city-dweller to draw some meaning from their environment, to hold a coherent sense of the world in mind. Some of Miller’s less successful images, her “out-takes,” attempt to register this destruction directly, in a kind of quasi-documentary style (Fig. 8). But there is a distinct difference, Bion teaches us, between registering impressions and sensations and “learning from” them. It takes a significant amount of symbolic work to grapple with the chaos of emotional experience, to transform



Figure 8. Lee Miller, Broken typewriters, London, England, c1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.

incoherent debris into signs and then into meaning. As in dream-life, meaning must find representation in symbols so that the full emotionality of human experience may be thought and transformed.

One of Miller's most arresting shots of the Blitz is of the shattered dome of the main building of University College. The site already carried considerable symbolic force. Founded in 1826, University College was the first institution to be established on an entirely secular basis and the first to admit women on equal terms with men. This is to say these damaged buildings might have caught Miller's eye for more than one reason. Gauging from her contact sheets, at first the photographer attempted to capture the destruction directly.¹⁰ As any one of



Figure 9. Lee Miller, Roof of University College, London, England, 1940. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved.

us might do, she seems to have wandered into the atrium and angled her camera upwards towards the gaping hole in the dome. But this view does not express a real emotional sense of the Blitz; it fails to convey the field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, the unreal reality of living in a city that is being destroyed slowly, methodically, night after night. Eventually Miller turned her attention away from the ceiling, letting her gaze wander downward toward the fragile human domain, until she finally focused her favoured Rolliflex twin-lens camera on the ground. Rain has poured through the shattered roof leaving a pool of water on the stone floor. Her final composition (Fig. 9) shows the shattered dome as a watery reflection, a surreal presentation of the kind Walter

Benjamin might have termed “profane illumination” (1929, p. 209). Here one can see why photography lends itself to the imaginary, serving as an exemplary instrument to defend against air war’s destruction of civilian life. Miller has managed to re-inject a devastated landscape with all the salubriousness of dream-life. Her composition is built largely through negative space and yet this very negativity somehow engenders meaning. Through a poignant use of absence, the picture manages to create a multi-dimensional, emotional space, a palpable feeling of contemplative loneliness, that in turn opens a sense of timelessness in which something lost might be recovered. The photograph registers the terrible bomb damage and at the same time provides a delicate, visual shield against it. Staying alive to such threatening experiences, the photographer implicitly shows, is tied to the ability to dream these experiences, indeed, it is as if one must dream oneself into existence. In short, Miller transforms the weight of this destruction into something sublime. Through such images spectators can glimpse not only all that air war seeks to destroy, but simultaneously a means to preserve human imagination, and with it, life.

Notes

1. As Sebald reports, by the end of the war there were some 31 cubic meters of rubble for every person in Cologne and some 42 cubic meters for every inhabitant of Dresden (1999, p. 4).
2. Of all the German literary works written at the end of the 1940s, Sebald finds only two that dared to face the horror of the ruins, Heinrich Böll’s *Der Engel schwieg* (*The Angel was Silent*) and Hans Erik Nossack’s *Der Untergang: Hamburg 1943* (*The End: Hamburg 1943*).
3. In *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud’s Aesthetics*, Sarah Kofman (1988) approaches the relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics from the opposite direction. She characterizes dream as the paradigm of the work of art and argues that Freud’s method of interpreting dreams is borrowed from the interpretation of art, which is to say Kofman suggests that Freud’s theory is more indebted to aesthetics than he cared to admit. Visual and literary symbolism corroborates the symbolism of dreams. Meanwhile, George Didi-Huberman (2005) argues that art historians have failed to incorporate the “blow” that Freud’s method dealt to the concept of representation. In his view, the dream-work’s “means of representation” or “figuration” opens up, or indeed, *rends* the very logic of the image.
4. Sarah Kofman offers a fuller picture of Freud’s use of the photographic metaphor in *Camera Obscura of Ideology* (1998) and Ulrich Baer traces the connection between the experience of trauma and the photographic image in *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (2002). I lean heavily on both texts here. In a less theoretical sense, however, the idea that photography provides a “protective shield” is plainly evident in the way any number of human rights organizations make the

distribution of cameras central to their project of monitoring violent abuses. To cite just one example, in 2007 B'tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights, launched a camera distribution project, providing Palestinians living in high conflict areas with video cameras, with the goal of bringing "the reality of their lives under occupation to the attention of the Israeli and international public, exposing and seeking redress for violations of human rights." See: <http://www.btselem.org/>

5. In this respect Kristeva seems to depart from Freud's (1920) view that there is no such system of defense that protects against stimuli coming from the inside. Compellingly, if unelaborated, she imagines literature provides "a refuge from our loves and insomnias, our states of grace and crisis" (2010, p. 20).
6. It would not take long for the bombs to reach Woolf in London. In her remarkable essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid," written shortly before her suicide in the spring of 1941, she describes "the queer experience" of "lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet, which may at any moment sting you to death. It is a sound that interrupts cool and consecutive thinking about peace. Yet it is a sound—far more than prayers and anthems—that should compel one to think about peace" (1942, p. 1). The short piece perhaps itself represents a way to dispel this destructive force via the labour of writing. Yet, the essay also betrays something of the difficulty of the struggle to maintain a "protective shield" for the mind in such times.
7. Of course there was civil resistance among the occupied countries. In this respect, Lee Miller's lover Roland Penrose made a clandestine trip into occupied France to compile documents made by the intellectuals of the French Resistance Movement. He published his collection, *In the Service of the People*, in 1945. In the second chapter, entitled "The Crime Against the Spirit," he writes of the Nazi occupation: "Not only was the repression exercised by them political but it also attacked liberty of thought and expression. It meant the reversal of long standing rights and fundamental ideas. In the campaign for the re-education of the national inscriptions dating from the French revolution such as 'Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood' were erased from public buildings and from the coinage . . . Life without their habitual liberties was inconceivable . . . No matter who they were, young or old, peasants or cultured Parisians, this alone was enough to awaken revolt" (Penrose, 1945, p. 8).
8. This is one of Freud's central arguments in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. There he assigns the protective function to the perceptual consciousness (*Pcpt.-Cs.*) system, which "must lie on the borderline between inside and outside; it must be turned towards the external world and must envelop the other psychical systems" (1920, p. 24). As he later notes, *protection against* stimuli is, in fact, a more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli, and the common traumatic neurosis is the consequence of a breach of the protective shield (p. 31).
9. Caitlin Davis (2006) suggests that Miller was not permitted to photograph the dead during the Blitz. But after D-Day, Miller gained U.S. Army accreditation and headed to the European front. She traveled with the units that liberated Buchenwald and then Dachau concentration camps, and there she did indeed train her camera on the dead, managing to transform even this difficult "raw matter" into remarkably potent signs. See Penrose (1992, pp. 183–187).
10. Miller's contact sheets are housed at the Lee Miller Archives (Blitz folder).

References

- Anzieu, D. (1989) *The skin ego*. (C. Turner, Trans.). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Baer, U. (2002) *Spectral evidence: The photography of trauma*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1929). Surrealism. In M. Jennings (Ed.) *Selected Writings: Vol. 2, Pt. 1, 1927–1930* (pp. 207–221). (M. Bullock, H. Eiland, & G. Smith, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002.

- Benjamin, W. (1936). The story teller: Observations on the works of Nikolai Leskov. In M. Jennings (Ed.) *Selected Writings: Vol. 3, 1935–1938* (pp. 143–166). (M. Bullock, H. Eiland, & G. Smith, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002.
- Benjamin, W. (1936). The work of art in the age of technological reproducibility. In M. Jennings (Ed.) *Selected Writings: Vol. 3, 1935–1938* (pp. 101–133). (M. Bullock, H. Eiland, & G. Smith, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002.
- Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Karnac.
- Bion, W. (1991). *A memoir of the future* (Vols. 1–3). London: Karnac.
- Bion, W. (1997). *War memoirs, 1917–1919*. F. Bion (Ed.). London: Karnac.
- Carter, E. (Ed.). (1941). *Bloody but unbowed: Pictures of Britain under fire*. New York: Scribners.
- Davis, C. (2006). Lee Miller's revenge on culture: Photojournalism, surrealism, and autobiography. *Women's Art Journal*, 27 (1), 3–9.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2005) *Confronting images: Questioning the ends of a certain history of art*. (J. Goodman, Trans.). University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Douhet, G. (1943). *The command of the air*. (D. Ferrari, Trans.). New York: Faber.
- Ferenczi, S. (1931). On the revision of the Interpretation of Dreams. In *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis* (pp.238–243). M. Balint (Ed.). London: Hogarth, 1955.
- Flanders, S. (1993). Introduction. In S. Flanders (Ed.), *The Dream Discourse Today*. London: Routledge.
- Freud, S. (1900). The interpretation of dreams. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 4–5, pp. ix–627). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1914). On the history of the psycho-analytic movement. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 14, pp. 3–66). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 18, pp. 3–64). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1925 [1924]). A note on the 'mystic writing-pad.' *Standard Edition* (Vol. 19, pp. 227–232). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1927). Humour. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 21, pp. 159–166). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1929). Some dreams of Descartes': A letter to Maxime Leroy. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 21, pp. 199–204). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1933 [1932]). New introductory lectures on psycho-analysis. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 22, pp. 3–182). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1939 [1934–38]). Moses and monotheism: Three essays. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 23, pp. 3–137). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1940 [1938]). An outline of psycho-analysis. *Standard Edition* (Vol. 23, pp. 141–207). London: Hogarth Press.
- Kofman, S. (1988). *The childhood of art: An interpretation of Freud's aesthetics*. (W. Woodhull, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kofman, S. (1998). *Camera obscura of ideology*. (W. Straw, Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (2010). Thinking about liberty in dark times. In *Hatred and Forgiveness*. (J. Herman, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lee Miller Archives (Blitz folder). Farley Farm House, East Sussex, England. Retrieved from <http://www.leemiller.co.uk>
- Levy, J. (2011). The dream in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and beyond. In S. Akhtar & M. K. O'Neil (Eds.), *On Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (pp. 128–153). London: Karnac.
- Meltzer, D. (1983) *Dream-life: A re-examination of the psycho-analytical theory and technique*. Oxford: Clunie.
- Mondzain, M.-J. (2009). Can images kill? *Critical Inquiry*, 36, 20–51.
- Murrow, E. R. (1941). *This is London*. E. Davis (Ed.). New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Patterson, I. (2007). *Guernica and total war*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Penrose, A. (1985). *The Lives of Lee Miller*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Penrose, A. (Ed.). (1992). *Lee Miller's War*. Boston: Bulfinch.

- Penrose, R. (1945). *In the service of the people*. London: William Heinemann.
- Picasso, P. (1995). *Paintings, Watercolors, Drawings and Sculpture: A Comprehensive Illustrated Catalogue: Spanish Civil War 1937–1939* (Vol. 6). San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts.
- Ranci re, J. (2009). *The emancipated spectator*. New York: Verso.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943) *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Pocket Books, 1958.
- Schneider, J. A. (2010). From Freud’s dream-work to Bion’s work of dreaming: The changing conception of dreaming in psychoanalytic theory. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 91, 521–540.
- Sebald, W.G. (1999) Air war and literature. In *On the Natural History of Destruction* (pp. 1–104). (A. Bell, Trans.). New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2003.
- Woolf, V. (1938). *Three Guineas*. In *A Room of One’s Own & Three Guineas*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Woolf, V. (1942). *Thoughts on peace during an air raid*. London: Penguin, 2009.