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Destruction and Delight

World War II Combat Photography and the Aesthetic Inscription of Masculine Identity

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During World War II, the American public was inundated with photographs of war. This article examines the iconography of war as revealed in photographs from the Pacific arena, identifying four primary motifs: the transformation of boys into warrior men, the fetishization of weaponry, the spectacle of death, and the quest to penetrate and dominate nature. War is a territorial game played by men to enact dominance, a social performance that inscribes gender identities on human bodies. War, like masculinity, is predicated on the subjugation of the feminine, which is encoded in the body and territory of the enemy, an inscription even more extreme when the enemy is of another race. These photographs enact the play of domination and subjugation through the imagery of impenetrability and rapability, thus contributing to the propagandistic construction of the enemy and extending the voyeuristic pleasures of domination to those not able to experience it firsthand.

Key words: masculinity, combat photography, World War II, Edward Steichen, violence, atomic bomb

With the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the cold war began, although officially, the United States and the Soviet Union remained allies until World War II ended six months later. In fact, the United States did not even inform the Soviet Union about the Manhattan Project before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, although the British had known from the start. Like a “hot” war, a “cold” war needs cultural expression, perhaps even more so, for there are no physical battles, no shedding of enemy blood to satisfy the desire for victory. The cold war was an attempt to create order out of chaos on a global scale, to “contain” the spread of Communism. This desperate need for security was a symptom of anxiety, the “official emotion” of the era (Schlesinger 1949, 52). The National Security Act (1947), the Truman

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Doctrine (1947), and the Marshall Plan (1948) were used as weapons to ameliorate this anxiety, as was photography, which packaged international conflict for consumption and provided reassurance of American supremacy through iconic images of heroes, martyrs, and military might. Between 1945 and 1950, Americans fought for abstractions, for symbolic representation itself. Photographs did the work of the real by imbuing cold war ideology with materiality, by visually affirming masculine potency.

Indeed, the years immediately following the Second World War replayed that war in photographs, in a succession of exhibitions, photo essays, and photographic books. In this essay, I will focus on the most publicly circulated and most famous of these images: photographs taken by Edward Steichen's Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, by Joe Rosenthal and Eugene Smith of the battle for Iwo Jima, and by army air forces photographers of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I will argue that these images of war created an imaginary of war—a vision of us versus them, although the "them" was interchangeable, which would become evident in 1950 in Korea, when former allies became enemies, when a hot war was waged for cold war purposes. As *Life* photographer David Douglas Duncan (1951) would write about his Korean War photographs, "I wanted to tell a story of war, as war has always been for men through the ages. Only their weapons, the terrain, the causes have changed." It was the aesthetics of war that mattered, an aesthetics predicated on violence.

War dramatically entered the institutional parameters of the art world in Edward Steichen's Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Power in the Pacific: Battle Photographs of Our Navy in Action on the Sea and in the Sky*, which ran from 24 January to 18 March 1945, after which it toured museums and art galleries throughout the nation.¹ Captain Steichen was a renowned modernist photographer who would go on to serve as director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1947 to 1962. In 1942, he had been placed in charge of naval aviation photography, where he personally commanded a unit of officer-photographers, professionals whom he had chosen: Wayne Miller, Charles Kerlee, Charles Fenno Jacobs, Horace Bristol, Victor Jorgensen, Dwight Long, Barrett Gallagher, John Swope, Thomas Binford, and Charles Steinheimer (Phillips 1981; Aubitz 1994; Maslowski 1993, 213-19). *Power in the Pacific* was composed of 156 murals, photographs of up to six by eight feet, which according to a museum press release, were intended to bring "the civilian into the war with immediacy and an overwhelming sense of reality" (MOMA 1945a). Corresponding to a loose narrative informed by dramatic text, the murals were mounted in various patterns on the walls and hung from the ceilings of the galleries, often at a diagonal, so as to lead the viewer through a maze of imagery that sought to emulate the eyewitness spectacle experienced by the combat photographer (United States Navy 1945, 144). Steichen (1963, 12) claimed that his motives for wanting to be involved in the war were based on his belief that "if a real image of war

could be photographed and presented to the world, it might make a contribution toward ending the specter of war.” However, the photographs, wall text, and captions of the exhibition did little to suggest the horrors of war. Instead, they emphasized heroism, glory, and above all, military might, a message packaged within an installation that promised entertainment, the vicarious experience of thrill and action. Indeed, with this exhibition, Steichen succeeded in fulfilling his primary job requirement, which according to Catherine Tuggle (1993, 365) “was to make aviation sexy and appealing to young men.” As the wall text introducing *Power in the Pacific* read,

Here is the war in the western seas, and here are the men who fight it. Here are the tools of the warrior’s trade—the guns, the ships, the airplanes. Here is the force that America sent into Far East waters—Midway, Saipan, Guadalcanal, the beach of bloody Tarawa, Lingayon Gulf, and Guam and Truk, and far-off gloomy Formosa. Yesterday these men were boys; today they are seasoned warriors. Yesterday the airplanes were but lines on a thousand blueprints; today they sting the air with death, and shake the earth with blastings. Yesterday the ships lay stacked in piles of shapeless metal; today they cleave the trackless sea, belching steel and brimstone against the slimy swamps, the mountain caves, the jungle. (Museum of Modern Art 1945b)

In addition to adopting the aura of romantic poetry, a common sentimentalizing feature of much writing about war, this introductory text features those motifs that figure prominently in World War II combat photography: the transformation of boys into warrior men, the fetishization of weaponry, the spectacle of death, and the quest to penetrate and dominate nature, signified by the territory and physical body of the enemy.

As Steichen (1958, 41) later recalled, he had repeatedly stressed to his unit “the importance of photographing the men, watching the men all the time, photographing them in everything they did” because although the ships and planes would one day be obsolete, men never would be. Consequently, *Power in the Pacific* is a visual narrative about men, a homosocial romance of male bonding. Indeed, the exhibition opened with a photograph that is a virtual “sea” of men. Shot from above, the uniformed sailors crowd together as they smile and look up at the camera, exuding a boyish exuberance that works to unify the individuals into a collective, from which these individuals receive their status as “men.” As the historian Susan Jeffords (1989, 59-60) pointed out, the “masculine bond insists on a denial of difference” between men, yet at the same time, “the bond itself depends for its existence on an affirmation of difference—men are not women.”² The warrior role was still an exclusively male one, even though the feminine is deployed; it is that from which these men flee.

What is so important about this masculine collective is that it enables men to experience fusion, to allow their ego boundaries to dissolve without “slipping back” into the feminine, signified by the maternal body from which they

came. In his two-volume work *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit (1989) analyzed masculine identity as the flight from the feminine, the fear of ego dissolution. In war, however, men are able to legitimately “flow,” to release their unconscious desires for fusion yet still remain men. Through unity with the military machine, the soldier male is able to achieve a totality denied him in nonmilitary life, where he must fight to maintain an ego boundary that allows him to function as a masculine individual within a capitalist patriarchal society. But during wartime, the entire nation is transformed into a war machine, led by a community of soldiers whose will is absolute. Theweleit maintained that this collective “battle for nation,” the struggle to defeat a political enemy, was not unlike “men’s own battle to become men,” the fight to destroy the feminine that always threatens (pp. 81-82).³

Theweleit’s exegesis on the male ego of capitalist patriarchy is indebted to the theorizing of Sigmund Freud, who recognized the ego as a sort of armor, a boundary that must be maintained against libidinal and unconscious desires that continually threaten from within. However, he also recognized an impulse toward ego annihilation. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), Freud formulated his notion of the “death drive,” an instinctual compulsion toward death that is always present, always seeking discharge. Post-Freudians, particularly object-relations theorists (Chodorow 1978), have described this compulsion not as a biological one but as an unconscious desire to return to preoedipal existence, to that blissful state of psychic oneness with the maternal body before the ego was formed and individuation began. Because the male child must transfer gender identification away from the mother, his fight to maintain his ego boundary is more difficult than that experienced by the female child. He is always in danger of merging into the feminine, which as Theweleit (1989) pointed out, is experienced as residing in both the exterior world and in the interior of his body. Although he fears the dissolution of his armor, however, he also desires it, a desire he must continually repress, except in war, where this desire for annihilation can be legitimately played out (pp. 309-23).

In 1959, the American philosopher J. Glenn Gray published a reflective memoir of his years as a soldier during World War II. His analysis of the appeal of war to men bears a striking resemblance to the conclusions drawn by Theweleit. Like Theweleit, Gray maintained that “men are different in degree only, not in kind,” and he argued that it is modern man’s estrangement from nature, “our common mother,” that fuels his “destructive fury” (pp. 233, 206, 237). According to Gray, men are attracted to war because it enables a “delight in seeing,” a “delight in comradeship,” and a “delight in destruction.” A man becomes so lost in the “majesty” of these delights that his “ego temporarily deserts him, and he is absorbed into what he sees” (p. 29). This dissolution of his ego does not frighten but rather empowers, for it allows “a joining and not a losing, a deprivation of self in exchange for a union with objects that were hitherto foreign” (p. 33). Fusion with these objects—with

other men, the weapons of war, and the awe-inspiring spectacle they create—is intoxicating, a sublime experience unavailable to him in civilian life (pp. 28-29, 33).

In 1947, Steichen published a tribute to the ship on which he had served. He titled the book *The Blue Ghost: A Photographic Log and Personal Narrative of the Aircraft Carrier U.S.S. Lexington in Combat Operation*. This “personal” narrative is not only about the inanimate structure that is the actual ship, however, for the Blue Ghost is much more than that: “Captain and the crew . . . the living and the dead, men and steel, men and guns . . . images, moments, emotions . . . all are fused, become a unity—a ship” (p. 149). This ship is “Lady Lex.” For the men who reside within and upon “her,” Lady Lex functions as a surrogate for the maternal body—she promises sustenance and provides the illusion of safety. She also invites fusion, a merging that does not threaten masculine identity. She is experienced as a living thing (p. 11), the material support of nearly three thousand men, a huge floating womb. However, fusion with her is mediated by unity with other men; this womb is a homosocial paradise, one created by men for men. Her 890-foot-long flight deck serves as a playground, on which the men play such games as “mumblety-pig,” and also as a gigantic breast, to which the men attach themselves to be physically nurtured. As Steichen explained,

The men, in small groups, are sprawled around the deck; some choose the hot sun on the open deck, others park themselves in the shade of a plane’s wings; they pillow up for each other in a fine earthy fellowship, reminiscent of colts resting under a tree or alongside the fence of a pasture, the head of one colt draped over the neck of another, or again, something in the manner of a litter of puppies, all curled up over, under, and about each other. (P. 58)

These men are able to regress to boyhood without fear of loss of manhood, for they are still warriors, military men. Furthermore, they are able to enjoy each other physically, without public chastisement as homosexuals, without the stigma of being “failed men,” or in other words, “women.” Within the context of war, they can release the feminine that they have fought so hard to repress; they can nurture and care for each other, hold and comfort one another—they are literally “brothers in arms.”

They are even free to engage in open expressions of narcissism and erotic contemplation, for any homoerotic connotations can be displaced onto the ritual framework of the heterosexist military.⁴ One photograph, captioned “A Work of Art Is Placed on Exhibition,” depicts a sailor displaying his tattoos (see Figure 1). Against the backdrop of the open sea, he stands in the center of the composition with his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, revealing a large tattoo that covers his entire chest. Framed between his nipples are the overlapping heads of three horses surrounded by a semicircular wreath of flowers. He also has tattoos on both forearms, visible beneath his rolled-up sleeves. With legs



Figure 1. *A Work of Art Is Placed on Exhibition*, photograph by Edward Steichen

apart and hands on hips, he thrusts his chest out toward the camera but also toward the gaze of the two sailors who frame him in the photograph. One crouches below; his shirt has slid from his shoulders, and the sun caresses his back. The other stands opposite the crouching figure, his stance echoing that of the tattooed sailor, who turns his head to watch as his comrade admires his decorated chest. This sailor's shirt is also open to the waist, seductively fluttering in the wind, which threatens to blow it from his shoulders altogether.

Steichen's caption for this photograph is an ambiguous one, for what is the "work of art" on display: the tattoos or the male bodies? Indeed, the tattoos mark the body as object, eroticize it, demand another's gaze. The subject matter of the tattoos also forces a "reading" of the man through his body; the tattoos serve as an autobiography of sorts, a record of his coming into manhood, often through possession of the feminine—his mother, a girlfriend, a land he has visited. As Duncan (1951) wrote about such visual signifiers, "And those tattoos were tremendously symbolic of the new, secret man beneath . . . for the words and colors, like their training, could never be erased." Tattoos serve

as emblems of membership in a sacred brotherhood; their application is conceived as an initiation rite, the achievement of manhood through violence and pain, which is endured with the support of other men.

Of course, violence is what war is all about. According to the scholar of religion James McBride (1995, 111-12), war is a "male territorial game" that celebrates the "founding violence of patriarchy through the signs of aggression and blood." Violence underwrites societal law, "binding" men in a "covenant" that must be ritually reinscribed. International law, which determines the distribution of power among patriarchal societies, is only "legitimated by its enforceability," the "willingness" of nations to go to war to preserve it. Furthermore, this "reinscription of the social order requires a sacrificial victim, someone whose blood effaces the threat of lawlessness that haunts patriarchal culture." Consequently, war "creates" its opponents from out of a pool of nations, who have the potential of being either friend or foe. The opponents are then constructed as the enemy, demonized to the point of dehumanization, a process aided by the mechanisms of propaganda, of which photography played an integral part.

Although *The Blue Ghost* does not picture enemy soldiers, Steichen's (1947) text conveys the exhilaration involved in successful missions against the Japanese. In fact, the men delight in killing what they refer to as "the Jap" or "the Nip." As an aircrewman makes his first "score," the men on the ship prance proud and elated as they watch the Japanese "Betty" explode and crash into the sea. As a prize, the aircrewman is given a ten-dollar bill, which has been autographed by his squadron. One of Steichen's photographs depicts ensign "Bull Durham" as he leans out of his plane window, smiling and holding two fingers in the air, which indicates that he "got two."

The text explains that when the ensign deplaned, he was "promptly surrounded by a group of admiring plane handlers," to whom he described in "full detail" how he had done "a great job polishing off those two Nips" (Steichen, 1947, 30-31, 89).

Another of Steichen's (1947) photographs in *The Blue Ghost* focuses on the flames and smoke that rise into the air after a Japanese plane has been shot down. He captioned it "Explodes—Crashes Into the Water—Creates an Imposing Funeral Pyre." Steichen described this episode in the text:

As the Lex was steaming past the burning wreckage of the first plane shot down, the portside crew saw the Jap insignia, the bright red disc, on part of a plane's wing and were able to guess what happened. I hear one lad laughingly tell his chief about seeing some of the gun crew throw all the handy loose tools at what looked like the heads of Jap airmen bobbing around in the water. The chief explodes with, "What the hell did they want to do a fool thing like that for, waste good tools, why didn't they turn the machine guns on the bastards?" (P. 99)

No revulsion is exhibited by Steichen (1947), who described himself as “wearing the same style grin” as the other men. In fact, along the flight deck, everyone displays an “expansive friendliness.” He explained, “War has moments when it seems almost like a ball game or a horse race. We’re the winning team out here today, we’re the jockey receiving a big floral horse-shoe after the race” (p. 99).

Steichen’s comparison of war to a game is, of course, at the heart of McBride’s argument, which is that war is a territorial game played by men to enact dominance. However, as McBride (1995) explained, enemy soldiers are only substitutes for the real threat:

The absence of male power is a frightening image in a patriarchal society. The thought of emasculation produces the fear that in turn both legitimizes and motivates aggressive action. In a world of mimetic rivalry skewed by the phallic metaphor for power, competitors contemplate their rival’s emasculation rather than their own. Rhetorical castration is therefore a sign of the ritual victim who exists as an interloper in a homosocial community. The feminization of the enemy is therefore not incidental but rather essential to the social dynamic of sacrificial violence in a patriarchal social order. The enemy is woman because she is what men are not but fear they might become. Ritual victimization of the enemy as female confirms male identity. Male territorial games prove that men are men—to men—and ensure the solidarity of the homosocial community. (Pp. 135-36)

Weapons, cameras included, play a central role in this game, for they act as fetishes of phallic power, security against the overwhelming castration anxiety brought about by war. They are hard items that will not fail; they hold out the promise of continual erection. The photographic iconography of war celebrates the impenetrability of ships, planes, and guns, yet it denies this hardness to the enemy, who when shown, is never depicted in a heroic or powerful manner. On the contrary, he is represented as defeated, humiliated, or dead. His weapons have been destroyed; his body has been or can be penetrated. In other words, he is rapable. As Catherine MacKinnon (1989, 178) pointed out, “To be rapable, a position that is social not biological, defines what a woman is.” Indeed, much of this imagery reveals the tremendous fear of bodily harm experienced in battle. For instance, the vantage point from which Steichen’s photograph was taken suggests that he was actually hiding behind the protective steel structure of the ship. Thus, one could argue that the “hard versus soft” iconography of combat photography functioned as a defense mechanism, part of an ideological apparatus erected to mask the terror and insecurity men felt in the midst of war.

Both *Power in the Pacific* and *The Blue Ghost* aestheticize, indeed fetishize, the weapons of war. Sunlight strikes metallic contours, creating alternating patches of shimmer and shadow. Steichen’s photographs are

especially concerned with this play of light, the heavy chiaroscuro lending a sense of drama to what are otherwise still scenes. His infrared photographs taken at night are especially dramatic, romantic even, as are his images of planes in flight. For example, in Steichen's photograph of officers congregating on the deck of the USS *Lexington* at night, the stark white uniforms of the men provide an elegant contrast to the dark backdrop of the ship, whose gently curving structural elements appear almost as if covered with black velvet. This soft tactile quality is also evident in his photograph of a plane captured in midair as it takes off from a flight deck. The blurring of the plane's wings, fuselage, and propeller functions to belie the machine's inorganic nature, imbuing it with the aesthetic of a graceful bird or butterfly instead. There is a lushness to these images, a lifelike sensuality imparted to inanimate metal. Moreover, Steichen's integration of man and machine appears at times almost seamless, as in *The Blue Ghost* photograph captioned "Solarium on 5-Inch Gun Turret," in which four ten-foot-long gun barrels seem to rise directly from the bodies of the men who lie sunbathing at their base. Charles Fenno Jacobs, one of Steichen's officer-photographers, is especially adept at uniting men and weapon, at linking the firmness of body with the solidity of metal (see Figure 2).⁵

Theweleit (1989) spoke at length about this fusion of man and machine, arguing that the metal of gun barrels takes the place of the soldier's "body armor," thus allowing the ego to transcend its own boundaries. In symbiosis with guns, the soldier can explode yet remain intact, can penetrate enemy bodies yet remain stable (pp. 179-81). Likewise, Gray (1959) argued that weapons are "not only an extension of the soldier's own power" but "a second skin, a protective layer against the harsh outer world." However, they also enable the soldier to relinquish individual guilt for killing, for with loss of self comes loss of responsibility. According to Gray, weapons not only "cement the wall of comradeship" by filling in the spaces between men but they also make killing easier, for it can be done from a distance—like a weapon, a soldier is simply an instrument of war (pp. 81, 177-79).

Jacobs also shot an image of a Japanese prisoner of war that demonstrates this contrast between hard and soft, impenetrability and rapability (see Figure 3).⁶ In the photograph, the crew of the battleship U.S.S. *New Jersey* gather on deck, where they strain to observe the naked body of a prisoner, who is "clipped" and "deloused," then forced to bathe himself publicly. He crouches between two buckets, his shaved head lowered to avoid the penetrating stares of the hundreds of eyes that are focused on him. The prisoner's back is to the camera; his posterior is exposed, vulnerable to the viewer's gaze. One of the officers nearest him smokes a cigarette in casual contemplation; a burly enlisted man to the officer's left holds what appears to be a baseball bat. The prisoner is sandwiched between Jacobs's gaze and that of the entire crew, signified by another photographer, who appears to be filming the incident. This play of domination and submission is reinforced by the huge gun barrels that

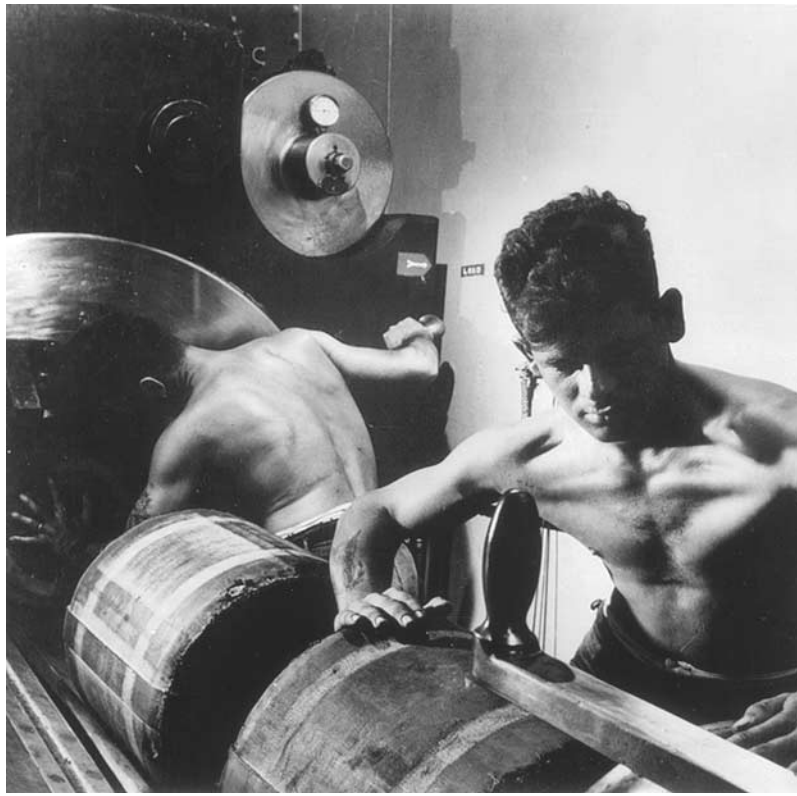


Figure 2. *Loading Powder Bags, USS New Jersey*, photograph by Charles Fenno Jacobs, 1945

seem to originate from the collective body of the crew and point in the direction of the defeated prisoner, who is doubly coded as “woman,” for he is not only rapable but impure. Indeed, he is physically separated from the other men, forced to “purify” himself under their scrutiny before he is allowed to don GI clothing. As McBride (1995, 28) argued, the “configuration of the body, woman, and filth is a commonplace in the history of Western culture.”

A revealing counterpart to this image is Horace Bristol’s *PBY Blister Gunner, Rescue at Rabaul* (see Figure 4), which also features an unclothed male with posterior exposed to the viewer’s gaze. However, this American navy gunner appears more like a heroic Greek god than a shamed or defenseless captive, his body poised in action, presumably as impenetrable as white marble. Of course, this image does not completely deny what it seeks to disavow, for the angle of view reminds the spectator that, indeed, all men can be penetrated. The photograph thus reveals the desires and fears that coexist within the male imaginary; desires that must be disowned, fears that must be displaced and then eradicated.



Figure 3. *Crewmen of the Battleship USS New Jersey Watch a Japanese Prisoner Bathe Himself before He Is Issued GI Clothing*, photograph by Charles Fenno Jacobs, 1944

According to Theweleit (1989), racism is “patriarchal domination in its most intense form.” Because the alien race is “encoded with threatening femininity,” with the “murderous forces of the man’s own interior,” it “must” be “exterminated” (pp. 76-77). During the war, the Japanese were vilified to a greater extent than were the Germans and Italians. As correspondent Ernie Pyle (1946) noted, “In Europe we felt that our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people,” but “the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive; the way that some people felt about cockroaches or mice.” Pyle even admitted that after observing Japanese prisoners “wrestling and laughing and talking just like normal human beings,” they still gave him “the creeps, and [he] wanted a mental bath after looking at them” (p. 5).⁷ As Theweleit (1989) argued, the horror one feels toward the body of a member of an alien race is experienced as a contamination of one’s own body. Thus, purification is necessary if bodily boundaries are to be maintained. Theweleit claimed that it “is only in war, in an organized act of murder,” that

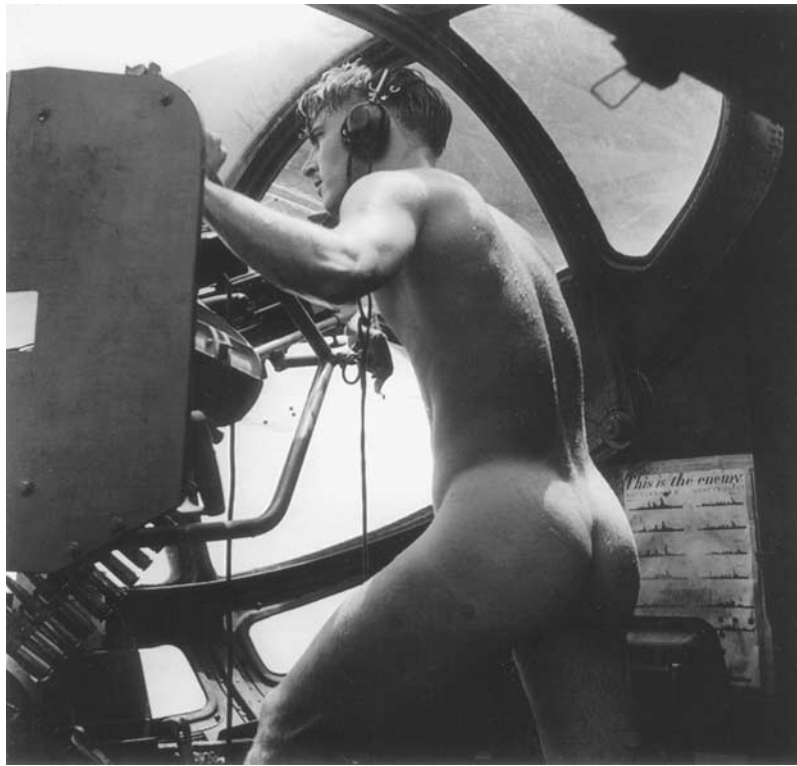


Figure 4. *PBY Blister Gunner; Rescue at Rabaul*, photograph by Horace Bristol

the soldier male can purify himself, “can expel the ‘primitive within’ without perishing in the process” (pp. 75-76). Likewise, McBride (1995) argued that war allows the soldier to experience continuity, “the oneness of death,” without actually dying: “The bodily integrity necessary for life is ensured if the ruptured body is not one’s own. The pleasures of rupture and self-annihilation are available by proxy: in ‘woman’ as victim. The male gaze vicariously makes the rupture its own” (p. 147).

One of the most renowned photographs of World War II gives visual expression to such rupture: W. Eugene Smith’s *Demolition Charge, Iwo Jima* of 1945 (see Figure 5). This image appeared on the cover of the 9 April 1945 issue of *Life* magazine, which included an article by Smith on the battle for the island. It was also reproduced in the 1946 *U.S. Camera* annual, in a thirty-two page spread dedicated to Iwo Jima. The scene depicts the blasting of a blockhouse in which Japanese soldiers were hiding. On the caption sheet, Smith (1969) had written, “Sticks and stones, bits of human bones . . . a blasting out on Iwo Jima.” *Sticks and Bones*, as it has been nicknamed, is an



Figure 5. *Marine Demolition Team Blasting out of a Cave on Hill 382, Iwo Jima, 1945.* Photograph by W. Eugene Smith

SOURCE: © The Heirs of W. Eugene Smith, courtesy Black Star, Inc., New York Collection, Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona.

aestheticization of death, killing as a thing of beauty, for despite the horrors it articulates, Smith has composed and cropped this image in keeping with the formal conventions of traditional landscape: harmony and balance, achieved by centering the explosion and using branches as framing devices; horizontal zones of foreground, middle ground, and background; striking contrast between light and dark; and repoussoir figures, who contribute spatial depth and act as our surrogates into the scene.

The battle to take Iwo Jima was an especially bloody one, the epitome of war as a territorial game. This two-and-a-half by five-mile island was a strategic site; it was only 660 miles from Tokyo, and it had two airfields and an unfinished airstrip. More important from a symbolic standpoint, Iwo Jima was part of the Japanese empire and had been so since 1887. To “take her” was literally to “rape” the enemy. Approximately two hundred thousand marines fought to dislodge twenty-three thousand Japanese soldiers, who were entrenched in underground caves and in steel-reinforced concrete blockhouses and pillboxes, many buried under three to four feet of volcanic sand at the foot and up the slopes of Mount Suribachi. Because naval bombardment was often ineffective, the fortifications had to be destroyed by demolition crews, who rigged dynamite charges at their openings while under heavy enemy fire and the threat of land mines. These explosive charges

were supplemented by fire from carrier planes, which repeatedly circled the island. Any Japanese soldier who survived the destruction of his bunker would be met by flame throwers, rifle shelling, or grenades. Hand-to-hand combat with knives was also reported, sometimes resulting in decapitation. Smith's photograph records the devastation that resulted from this continual assault, this annihilation of all enemy life—human and otherwise. Even before the battle, the island evoked death; nicknamed "Hot Rock," its beaches were black and its surface oozed yellow mists of sulphur.

Smith's photograph records one moment in the six-day battle to take Hill 382, nicknamed the "Meatgrinder" due to the hundreds of brutal deaths that occurred there. Six companies took turns assaulting this volcanic nob—on the first day, one company lost forty men; another killed 150 Japanese. The company that finally captured the hill lost so many men, including seven officers, that it was virtually annihilated and had to be combined with another after the battle. The photograph reeks of this mass death. Scorched tree branches rise from the haze of volcanic ash that shrouds the pockmarked earth, serving to frame the four members of the demolition crew who take cover behind a rock. Clouds of smoke and black sand rise into the air behind them, as the dynamite explodes and debris flies. Like a Gothic graveyard shrouded in mist, this image is an apotheosis of death, from the twisted branches that evoke skeletal remains to the smoke that threatens to suffocate. Nothing remains alive in this small area except for the four American soldiers, whose bodily integrity seems a contradiction, considering that everything around them has burst, been blasted apart. Nature has submitted to the spectacle of death, brought about by phallic hegemony, represented by the weapons of war, to which the soldier male is "coupled" (Theweleit 1989, 178). Indeed, "she" has been raped and murdered, acts that can be forever savored through the voyeuristic lens of the camera.

Iwo Jima was also the site of another famous war photograph, perhaps the most reproduced, and most ideologically laden, photograph in American history: *The Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima* by Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize (see Figure 6). In *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero*, Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall (1991) traced the circumstances surrounding the taking of this photograph and the mythologizing that occurred in its wake. Their investigation into the deliberate orchestration of this American icon demonstrates the centrality of visual display to the maintenance of heroic masculinity, as well as the ability of a single photograph to create the "truth," despite historical fact. Indeed, Rosenthal's photograph implies that the battle for Iwo Jima has been won; however, almost a month of fighting remained before the island was secure. Moreover, three of the men photographed would be killed on the island. The spontaneity suggested by the composition was also contrary to fact, for the decision to raise a flag on Mount Suribachi was made aboard the U.S.S. *Eldorado* on 22 February, the day before Rosenthal shot the



Figure 6. *The Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima*, photograph by Joe Rosenthal, 1945

photograph. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal and Marine General Holland M. Smith believed that a symbolic act was needed that would raise troop morale and appease public criticism over the tremendous cost in American lives. They concluded that the sight of the American flag over the highest peak of the island would accomplish both but only if civilian photographers covered the event. Therefore, Forrestal decided that he would personally witness the battle for Suribachi, for wherever he went, the photographers were sure to follow. At 8 A.M. on 23 February, four marines blazed a trail to the top of the volcano, surprisingly unopposed by enemy fire. A few hours later, another group also reached the summit unchallenged, accompanied by marine photographer Lou Lowery, who was covering the battle for *Leatherneck*. Lowery photographed as the men raised a small flag, which when seen, brought exclamations of joy from marines on the beaches below. However, Lieutenant Colonel Chandler Johnson decided that a larger flag would be even more effective. It was the raising of this second flag that Joe Rosenthal witnessed and photographed, and it was this image, published in newspapers throughout the United States two days later, that gave the marines the publicity they sought, for it established their reputation as *the* fighting men, immortalized them as men of “uncommon valor,” as inscribed on the base of the Marine Corps Memorial.

Rosenthal’s iconic image has become a synecdoche for the war, perhaps even for the United States itself. It encapsulates the country’s belief in its own goodness, in the spirit of democracy, signified by each individual marine

working toward a common goal, represented by the American flag. Undying spirit, stamina, courage, endurance—the summit was reached, the territory claimed, even though it lay in shambles beneath their feet. As the historian Susan Moeller (1989, 21) argued, the “metaphor that twentieth-century war photography has most neatly embraced is that of the American frontier.” And this “frontier, in short, was a frontier of violence.”⁸ Of course, as the image suggests, patriotism functions as a euphemism for violence. The dead, that would eventually total approximately all 23,000 Japanese and 6,775 Americans, are nowhere seen. This was the picture of war that would sustain Americans throughout the early years of the cold war; it gave materiality to ideology, physical substance to patriotism. In addition to its numerous printings in the media, Rosenthal’s photograph was used as the symbol of the seventh War Bond drive, and it appeared on a postage stamp, three-and-a-half million posters (including recruiting posters for the marines), and 175,000 display cards for buses and trolleys (Knightley, 1975, 295). It also inspired the 1949 film *Sands of Iwo Jima*, starring John Wayne,⁹ and the bronze memorial to the marines at Arlington National Cemetery by Felix de Weldon, which was completed in 1954. More than any other photograph, this image functions as an icon to virile asceticism; it invokes “good” feelings about war, about the nation’s superiority, both morally and in terms of military might. It also leaves no doubt as to the manliness of our fighting men, for warriors are, by definition, men—not boys, not women—especially marines, who were at the top of the military’s masculine pecking order. They were *real* men; they went in first.

Warrior masculinity requires heroes for its survival; it needs to interpellate young boys into the martial brotherhood. The rewards promised by war must be valued over human life; boys are not only transformed into killers, but they must be made willing to accept their own death. In return, they are given the chance to achieve the highest status of manhood, to gain honor, even immortality. The three surviving marines depicted in Rosenthal’s photograph were immediately transformed into national heroes; they were removed from active duty and paraded throughout the United States to promote war bonds. They were even invited to raise the flag over the U.S. Capitol on V-E Day and to reenact the flag raising for the closing scene of *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, truly a case of art imitating art. Of course, their status as heroes was not a result of their “uncommon valor” but because they were the subjects of a particular photograph. In other words, it was the image of heroism that was important, not necessarily the substance. Although the military and the press initially acknowledged the actual events and the men involved in the previous ascents up Suribachi, Marling and Wetenhall (1991) concluded that in one month’s time, fiction won out over fact, for it was “more interesting,” and it seemed “truer” (pp. 97, 75).¹⁰ It was this “truth” that photographers recorded as it was reenacted by a group of six- and eight-year-old boys in a California pasture and by marines at the flag-raising ceremony on Okinawa the following



Figure 7. Wounded Gunner Kenneth Bratton, *USS Saratoga*, photograph by Wayne Miller

June.¹¹ The “truth” was that any boy could grow up to be a hero, whether a small-town boy from Wisconsin or New Hampshire, or even a Pima Indian from an Arizona reservation, as were the three surviving flag raisers.

Heroic manhood is, of course, one of the most important iconographic motifs of war photography. Heroism is predicated not only on triumph, however, but also on sacrifice. *Power in the Pacific* includes a photograph of a wounded gunner being lifted out of the turret of an Avenger torpedo bomber, which had landed on the U.S.S. *Saratoga* after a successful raid on Rabaul (see Figure 7). The caption, printed in Gothic script and given the entire

facing page in the catalog, reads, “. . . took him down and wrapped his body in clean linens” (Museum of Modern Art 1945b, 26). Again, McBride’s (1995) notion of virile asceticism is at play, for a sense of religious morality is imparted to military action. Like the biblical Christ, air crewman Kenneth Bratton offers his own life as a sacrifice; however, unlike Christ, the war hero does not turn the other cheek when threatened. Rather, as the caption accompanying a reproduction of this photograph in the 1945 *U.S. Camera* annual reads, he keeps “plastering the Japs with his machine gun” until the attack is over, even though he has almost lost consciousness due to the shattering of his knee and the subsequent loss of blood (Central Pacific Offensive 1945, 103).

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Rene Girard (1977) argued that war functions to ritualize and thus purify violence. “Only blood itself, blood whose purity has been guaranteed by the performance of appropriate rites—the blood, in short, of sacrificial victims” (p. 36), can “cleanse” society of “contaminated blood,” the “pollution” that results from indiscriminate violence. War and religion are ritual frameworks that prevent “impure” violence, reciprocal acts of vengeance that might spiral out of control; cultural order and stability would thus be threatened. War, like religion, functions to unite a community, to reinforce the social fabric. During war, the violence on which all masculine relationships are based can be redirected into “proper channels”; it can be disposed of “more efficiently” because it is not regarded as “something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without” (pp. 36, 48, 10, 14). War is a socially sanctioned catharsis.

Nowhere is a sense of catharsis more evident than in the imagery of the atomic bomb. Indeed, the photographs taken of the bombs as they exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent the epitome of violence purified. These photographs were published in the 1946 *U.S. Camera* annual, along with “before and after” photographs of the two Japanese cities, eyewitness reports, and articles and diagrams explaining how the bomb works; however, no imagery of human casualties was included. Throughout this section of the annual, a cold, almost clinical tone prevails, punctuated only by spurts of awe and fascination over the destructive power and strange beauty of the exploding bombs. Any acknowledgment of human death is suppressed beneath the rhetoric of aesthetics. The Hiroshima bomb is described as follows: “A white mushroom of smoke leaped 20,000 feet into the air, spilled into a great billowy cloud. Then, like a plucked bloom, the top of this cloud broke from its stem and rose several thousand feet” (p. 322-23). On the Nagasaki bomb, William L. Laurence of the *New York Times* was quoted: “As the first mushroom floated off into the blue it changed its shape into a flowerlike form, its giant petal curving downward, creamy white outside, rose-colored inside” (pp. 322-23).

Mass murder has become a spectacle, an aesthetic display. Ironically, the complete annihilation of feminine nature by masculine science is described in terms of nature’s most profound beauty, that of the flower. Elaine Scarry

(1985, 66) wrote, however, that discourse from the realm of vegetation often appears to deny the reality of the bodily injury inflicted during war, for it is believed that vegetable tissue is immune to pain. Euphemisms are also employed to transform destructive acts into ones of creation. According to Brian Easlea, a former nuclear physicist, the metaphor of the “pregnant phallus” recurs throughout the writings and reminiscences of those involved in the development of the atomic bomb; it is repeatedly referred to as a “baby,” the living offspring of the scientists involved in its creation. Easlea (1983, 92-98, 11-39, 111-12) argued that “compulsive masculinity,” an unconscious and irrational symptom of “uterus envy,” fueled the desire to create an exclusively “male birth process,” one predicated on phallic penetration of, and complete dominion over, feminine nature. This compulsion, which dates from the time of Francis Bacon and the founding of modern science, eventually gave birth to “Little Boy,” which had been constructed by male physicists and “delivered” from the “belly” of a B-29 bomber manned by an all-male crew. A few days later, “Fat Man” was delivered to Nagasaki. Approximately two hundred thousand human beings were annihilated within a few seconds of time, events hailed as of great historical significance. Although admitting that it “symbolized a funeral pyre for the Japanese Empire,” Laurence also wrote that the 16 July 1945 test bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico, “came as a great affirmation to the prodigious labors of our scientists,” who had “managed to ‘know the unknowable and unscrew the inscrutable.’” It was a moment that ranked with that moment “long ago when man first put fire to work for him and started on his march to civilization” (*U.S. Camera* 1946, 328, 318). The atomic bomb is masculine overcompensation on a grand scale; the culmination of eons of struggle to civilize, to control and dominate, feminine nature. Indeed, 1945 ushered in a new era—nature could be eradicated once and for all, and it would only take a few seconds. Catharsis had never been more pure.

The imagery of the bomb was more than the imagery of death purified: it was a cold war icon of intimidation. Although many scientists involved with the Manhattan Project initially claimed that their objective was to develop the bomb before Nazi Germany did, Easlea (1983) pointed out that progress on the bomb actually accelerated after V-E Day. In fact, he reiterates the long-standing argument that the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima was primarily a means to intimidate the Soviet Union not to save the lives of American soldiers, as was publicly claimed (pp. 98-110). Photographs of the bomb dominated newspapers and magazines in August of 1945; *Life* devoted almost an entire issue to the story. These photographs came to embody atomic age anxiety—death without warning, death so absolute, so instantaneous, so barbarous. However, this anxiety was ameliorated by the aesthetic brilliance of this imagery, epitomized by the 1952 color photograph of the world’s first hydrogen fusion blast, which occurred at Eniwetok Atoll, completely obliterating the test island. Concentric rings of saturated red encircle a

billowy cloud of fiery yellow, which rises on a stem from the haze-covered earth below. If unaware, one might mistake the subject for an atmospheric or celestial wonder, a natural phenomenon of great beauty. Indeed, atomic bomb imagery was readily subsumed within the genre of landscape photography.

Photography enabled the public at large to experience vicariously the triumph of masculine science, the “gang rape of nature” (Easlea 1983, 20), through the socially esteemed act of aesthetic contemplation. As Gray (1959) argued, the “delight in seeing,” although considered in “its higher reaches” to be a “noble” aspiration, “nearly always involves a neglect of moral ideals”:

Morality is based in the social; the ecstatic, on the other hand, is transsocial. The fulfillment of the aesthetic is in contemplation, and it shuns the patience and the hard work that genuine morality demands. The deterioration of moral fervor, which is a consequence of every war, may not be entirely due to the reversal of values that fighting and killing occasion. May it not be also a consequence of aesthetic ecstasy, which is always pressing us beyond the border of the morally permissible? (P. 39)

Combat photography is a masculine art, for it allows the vitality of art, its status as societal excess, without the prettiness and artificiality that had come to be associated with pictorialist and modernist photography. Moreover, it mirrors the male psyche, which seeks to armor within that which continually threatens to erupt. Indeed, the rationality implied by composition is wedded to the irrationality of its subject matter—violence. Thus, the combat photograph signifies a contained violence analogous to war and to masculine identity—a rational irrationality. Because war is already an aesthetic, combat photography is the aestheticization of aesthetics—pure spectacle. It is war for sale, war made accessible to all, not just the soldiers on the battlefield. The pleasure in seeing, so important to the soldier in combat, is extended to those not able to experience it firsthand. Consequently, combat photography creates a desire for even more spectacle; it whets the appetite of a population that has not experienced the horrors of war firsthand. It has merely enjoyed its beauty through the voyeuristic, violent lens of the camera.

NOTES

1. A number of war photography exhibitions toured the nation that year, including those funded by private corporations to advertise their contributions to the war effort. The United States Steel Corporation sponsored a show of sixty photographs, which was viewed by more than one million spectators. Graflex, a camera company, sponsored *Photography at War*, an exhibition held at the Museum of Science and Industry in New York, and *GRAFLEX Sees the War*, exhibits of war photographs that toured the country in conjunction with war bond drives. These exhibitions were promoted in advertisements that appeared in a number of different photography journals. The ads emphatically stressed the important role that photography, and thus corporate producers of photographic equipment, played in the waging of war. In addition to Graflex, the

Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation, Kodak, and the Universal Camera Corporation all highlighted their war contributions.

2. The World War II military was still segregated by race; thus, not all men were the "same." Still, boundaries of class, region, and ethnicity were suspended in service of the masculine bond. According to Jeffords (1989, 54-62), by the time of the Vietnam War, the effacement of racial boundaries had become a central focus of war narratives and memoirs. In fact, she related a number of cases in which American soldiers felt a stronger sense of comradeship with the Viet Cong (because they too were soldiers) than with the civilians back in the United States.

3. Theweleit's (1989) *Male Fantasies*, the most extensive investigation to date into the psyche of what he termed the "soldier male," is based on his examination of the novels, letters, and memoirs of the German Freikorps—small bands of private volunteer soldiers that roamed Germany in the aftermath of World War I. Many of these men would play an active role in the rise of Nazism. Theweleit used their artifacts to theorize the fascist imagination, which he suggested may be "the norm for males living under capitalist-patriarchal conditions" (p. 27). He saw the development of the fascist male as part of a wider history, one that began with early modern Europe and the emergence of the bourgeois individual—the "civilized" male ego. Barry McCarthy (1994) identified a similar historical trajectory, one that culminates at the turn of the twentieth century, when the warrior ideal was renewed and "manly" masculinity was equated with "warrior values." A post-World War II study based on a series of surveys conducted on American subjects concluded that a potential for fascism can be detected in one's personality and that the greatest potential was exhibited by those who valued masculine traits to an extreme (Adorno et al. 1950, 428-29).

4. According to Zeeland (1995), the homosocial environment of the military allows straight men to experience physical and emotional closeness, including male-male sexual activity, without considering themselves or being considered by others as gay.

5. Celebratory imagery that linked the body and the machine had been produced by male modernists of various political persuasions, from the left-leaning French socialist Ferdinand Léger to the right-leaning Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni. Andrew Hewitt (1993) analyzed the masculinist ideology informing the celebration of the machine that characterizes the writings of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian futurist whose ideas were so influential to both fascism and modernism, or what Hewitt termed "Fascist Modernism." He argued that, to Marinetti, the machine serves as the ideal metaphor for the human body and for the political state, for it stands in opposition to nature and posits the possibility of "(re-)production" without women. The machine as a symbol of order and control is applied to bodies that in turn become cogs in the larger machine that is the state. These bodies no longer originate desire but become the vessels through which desire flows (pp. 133-60).

6. This photograph was not included in the *Power in the Pacific* exhibition nor in the photographic books compiled by Steichen. In fact, I have been unable to trace any publication of this photograph in the 1940s or 1950s.

7. Of course, unlike the Germans and the Italians, the Japanese had attacked the actual territory of the United States; however, this alone does not explain the dehumanization, which would, of course, culminate in the annihilation of thousands of Japanese people at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of the surveys published in Stouffer, Lumsdaine, and Lumsdaine (1949) reveals that among those training for combat, 38 to 44 percent would "really like to kill a Japanese soldier," whereas only 5 to 9 percent felt the same way about a German one. In another survey, which asked soldiers what they would like to see happen to the enemy after the war, 67 percent of enlisted men answered that they would like to "wipe out" the entire Japanese nation, but only 29 percent said the same thing about the Germans. For officers, the answer was 44 and 15 percent, respectively (pp. 34, 158).

8. Richard Slotkin (1992) argued that the frontier is the primary myth of American culture, one dependent on the continual construction of masculine heroes who regenerate society through violence and blood. Consequently, it is not only Western heroes who embody this myth

but a variety of fictional and historical characters, including gangsters, hard-boiled detectives, politicians, and soldiers.

9. This influential war drama was directed by Allan Dwan, produced by Edmund Grainger, distributed by Republic Pictures, and written by Harry Brown and James Edward Grant. The film reiterates masculine tradition and the proving of one's manhood as the primary motivations for going to war. The character Private Pete Conway, whose father had been a marine officer, claimed that he was there "strictly for tradition" and that he felt he needed to prove his bravery to his father, even though he was dead: "I embarrass my father. I wasn't tough enough for him, too soft." John Wayne's character, Sergeant Stryker, acts as a surrogate for Conway's father; both epitomized the tough masculinity associated with the warrior.

10. On the mythic construction of this event, see also Albert Boime (1998).

11. The photograph of the boys raising the flag was originally published in the 16 April 1945 issue of *Newsweek* (p. 82). Supposedly the boys had driven off "the enemy," actually two cows, before reenacting Rosenthal's photograph.

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