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An Ethics of Seeing: Utopian Readings of Gerda Taro's PhotoScapes

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Abstract:

The paper explores the intersections of photography, ethics, and utopian thinking through a critical reading of Gerda Taro's photographs of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Being the first to be systematically covered by professional photojournalists, this war generated images that shaped cultural memory and political imagination across Europe and beyond. Within this historical and cultural frame, I propose an "ethics of seeing" grounded in a utopian mode of interpretation.

Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and John Berger, I define photoscapes as visual fields where political struggle, human suffering, and aspirations for a transformed future converge. Photography is double-fold since it is a cultural artefact and a political instrument, so it is read here as documentation and as an active force that constructs meaning, provokes ethical reflection, and calls for engagement. Utopian thinking, functioning as a "lens over the lens," enables photographs to be seen simultaneously as records of historical fact and as prompts for critical and imaginative interpretation.

The paper develops this argument through two case studies of Taro's work. Photoscape I | Revealing Hope starts by examining her early images of militias and civilians in revolutionary Spain, which reveal a utopian sense of possibility where camaraderie, determination, and joy are present. Photoscape II | Reporting Destruction turns to her later photographs of devastation and civilian casualties, where shattered architecture and mutilated bodies blur the boundary between human and urban landscapes.

By placing hope and destruction in productive tension, Taro's photoscapes illustrate how photography functions as both memory and prophecy: anchoring historical events while opening critical perspectives on the present and future. Utopian reading thus becomes a methodological tool that resists cultural amnesia and challenges the inevitability of war.

The paper concludes that Taro's work should be understood as a photojournalistic record and an enduring platform for ethical and political engagement. Being testimonies of resistance and reminders of loss, Taro's photoscapes make us reflect on the role of visual culture in shaping memory, political imagination, and the ethics of intervention.

Keywords: Resonance, Architecture and Memory, Soviet Modernism, Urban Flânerie, Photographic Encounter

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Introduction

George Orwell's Homage to Catalonia, first published in 1938, depicts his experience as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War. It became the most influential narrative of the conflict in the Anglophone world, although still somewhat controversial as to its possible impact on the popular understanding of foreign politics in the aftermath of World War II and the consequent Cold War. Controversy aside, the Spanish Civil War is perhaps the European conflict of the twentieth century that gathers the most consensual opinion. As the first major stand against authoritarian regimes, the Spanish Civil War was an exceptional moment in European Culture. Though militarily unsuccessful and marked by utter bloodshed, it mobilised intellectuals, artists, journalists and photographers from European and American countries to travel to Spain to report on the war, fight against the nationalists and provide medical assistance to the war's wounded. This localised conflict captured, indeed, the world's attention not only due to the news reports, but fundamentally to the photographs that accompanied them, since the Spanish Civil War was the first war to be covered by professional photographers. Drawing from this specific historical context, this paper explores the intersections of photography, ethics, and utopian thinking through a critical reading of Gerda Taro's photographic work to propose an ''ethics of seeing''. Through a utopian reading of Taro's ''photoscapes'' – a term I created to define visual fields where political struggle, human suffering, and aspirations for a transformed future coexist – I aim to illustrate how these photoscapes may be a powerful tool in shaping cultural memory and instigating political activism.

In Regarding the Pain of Others, inspired by Virginia Woolf's Three Guineas, Susan Sontag reflects on how photographs of civilian casualties of the Spanish Civil War were rhetorical tools to ''reiterate'', ''simplify'', ''agitate'' and ''create an illusion of consensus''[1]. As described, one of the photographs depicted a bombsite: part of a building was destroyed, and human bodies were scattered nearby. It was difficult to see whether the victims were men, women or children. They were piles of flesh among the rubber. ''To be sure,'' Sontag claims, ''a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street. (...) Look, the photographs say, this is what it's like. This is what war does. And that, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerated War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins''[2]. In fact, it is the combination of these two elements – the cityscape and the human landscape, which I call photoscapes – that really makes spaces and times subversive and utopian, a complex web of meanings. As a photograph is a sociopolitical document, so is utopia an instrument to decode it. Imagine that utopia is the lens we place over the camera to add a new layer of significance and, simultaneously, the filter we use to peel off a layer of encrypted meanings.

1. Sontag 2004, page 7/91.

2. Sontag 2004, page 89/91.

Utopia is the tool that allows us to zoom in and analyse the present depicted in the shot, as well as the key to zoom out and frame the crystallised moment in time in the greater scheme of things – the historical and social contexts.

There are historical moments in which photography, as a sociopolitical document, is particularly fertile in multiple meanings: the revolutionary periods. In this paper, I propose to reflect on iconic works of Gerda Taro during a particularly subversive political event in twentieth-century history, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and decode new meanings in her photoscapes of hope (photoscape I) and of destruction (photoscape II). In order to do that, however, it is necessary to understand what the ethics of seeing entails and what makes it different from the mere act of seeing.

Utopian Thinking: A Lens Over the Lens (Theoretical framework)

Since its development, and especially due to its democratisation, photography has become the means of cultural and historical record par excellence[3]. Photojournalism, which proved to be key in recording, incriminating, and later justifying the Second World War, by divulging the crimes against Humanity in the Nazi camps, started, in fact, during the Spanish Civil War. It was the first war to be ''covered'' by professional photographers, whose work was then published in newspapers and magazines in Spain and abroad. I perceive it, therefore, as a utopian instrument to fight against cultural amnesia and manipulative propaganda. Illustrative of built architecture (cityscapes) and social architecture (human landscapes), photography, which is by its nature an anthology of images, becomes a social anthology: an encyclopaedia of cultural performances, moulded by historical events and driven by a subversive quality. An artefact. Photography's transformative power becomes more evident when it portrays disarranged or deconstructed spaces, when the status quo is suspended or contested. As Susan Sontag wrote: ''In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe''[4]. They are a kaleidoscope of images that form an anthology of miniatures of reality. They are pieces of the world.

3. Photography has been essential in recording and witnessing subversive and/or clandestine cultures, namely silenced communities and hidden spaces. For instance, Sebastien Lifshitz's collection of vintage portraits from the early twentieth century, The Invisibles (2014), demonstrates how photography was a medium to celebrate queer relationships during a time when gay couples were forced to remain in the obscurity of the closet. This collection also proves that it was possible to find domestic happiness and tranquillity within the home, although facing social, political and legal discrimination. Loving: A Photographic History of Men in Love 1850s-1950s (2020) by Hugh Nini and Neal Treadwell is another great example. This anthology assembles photographs from the nineteenth century and originated from all around the world (Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Japan, Greece, Latvia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Serbia).

4. Sontag 2011, page 5/153.

Whereas photography is a technology, a cultural artefact, and a method to convey meanings, utopia is a way of seeing or unseeing those meanings, and the two elements combined allow for new opportunities to see or create new meanings. As we will come to understand, such is Gerda Taro's Spanish Civil War work: not a mere (neutral) historical record but an enduring platform for ethical and imaginative engagement. To better understand how utopian thinking may then be perceived as a lens over the camera's lens, I selected three main axes of analysis to inform the ethics of seeing, co-opting one of Sontag's expressions:

1. Time: instantaneous/retrospective/prospective;
2. Space: situated/articulated;
3. Identity: critical/creative.

While photography appears to be intimately connected with "discontinuous ways of seeing", as Sontag puts it, utopian thinking is, on the contrary, a holistic way of understanding[5]. The instant moment is at the same time frozen in a forever present, inscribed already in the past, but connected to a future already happening. The instant photographed is, therefore, part of a continuum which is both pictured and absent. In other words, photographs are relics of the past, traces of history, but they are also pieces of a collective memory we want to – and must – preserve and keep alive as if it were a prophecy. In these cases, a prophecy we should prevent from happening again, rejecting the idea that war is inevitable (time)[6].

Thus, the photography situates and utopianism contextualises, turning the photographed into something that is both localised and transcendent. It puts oneself in relation to the world. It articulates and makes one empathise because context is everything. While photographs isolate, utopianism connects all these disconnected instants depicted in those shots (space). And, as John Berger states, "in life, meaning is not instantaneous. Meaning is discovered in what connects, and cannot exist without development". Therefore, we need a narrative. "Without a story, without an unfolding, there is no meaning. Facts, information do not in themselves constitute meaning"[7]. Utopian thinking provides this narrative.

5. Sontag 2011, page 117/153

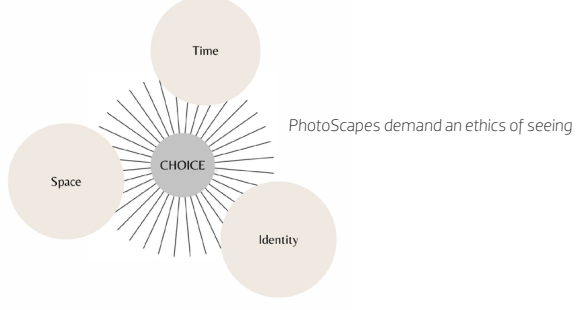
6. John Steinbeck, in Once There Was a War (1958), states: "Perhaps it is right or even necessary to forget accidents, and wars are surely accidents to which our species seems prone. If we could learn from our accidents it might be well to keep the memories alive, but we do not learn. In ancient Greece it was said that there had to be a war at least every twenty years because every generation of men had to know what it was like. With us, we must forget, or we could never indulge in the murderous nonsense again".

7. Berger 2013, page 74/223.

Moreover, reading the photograph by resorting to the utopian lens also allows us to be critical of what is depicted, critical of it (not necessarily in a pejorative way) and creative, whether aesthetically or politically (identity). Indeed, we should perceive photography as a utopian instrument due to its factual and metaphorical value, as an object of analysis which is at the same time a partial reproduction of the real (historical events, for instance) and a "negative" creator of new, sometimes, hidden cultural and political meanings. This aspect leads us to photography's most aesthetic – and personal – dimension, which Roland Barthes described as "the embrace of the subjective".

In Camera Lucida, Barthes poetically illustrates this idea by saying that "in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes". To interpret a photograph demands, according to Barthes, to perceive these two layers of significance in a photograph, which he called 1. the Stadium, meaning what is depicted articulating it in all its complex context ("The Studium is a kind of education"); and 2. the Punctum, the detail of the photograph that captures our gaze, and our imagination and invites subjectivity. (The Punctum reveals what Brian Dillon, in a review for the Guardian, called "Barthes sensibility".) A utopian reading of photoscapes is, hence, a narrative, a journey that goes beyond what is depicted.

Although photographs are normally used to construct or illustrate "unilinear" thoughts, as if chronologically coherent, in fact, this journey, this narrative, of photoscapes is very much like a memory; and, as John Berger points out, "memory is not unilinear at all. Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event". Berger describes this notion with a star-like shape. Inspired by Berger's idea, I placed the key elements of analysis in this star-diagram fashion to illustrate the "ethics of seeing" I propose:



8. Barthes 1982, page 36/85.

9. Barthes 1982, page 36/85.

At the heart of this ethics lies the notion of choice, an action inherent to the process of taking a photograph. As John Berger puts it, it is the moment the photographer consciously or unconsciously thinks: "I have decided that seeing this is worth recording"[10]; since, as Berger concludes: "Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious"[11]. It is the choice of the photographer to take a photograph in a specific moment, in a specific location, to transmit a message that unites the three axes (time, space and identity). But where are all these elements inscribed? I propose the photoscapes, which are cityscapes and the human landscapes depicted in Gerda Taro's war photographs. Why these two dimensions of spaces? Because, traditionally, architecture is perceived as either a utopia or a dystopia materialised, a dream or nightmare made of stone, imagination in concrete. However, for the purposes of this article, it is the organic dimension of the architectural landscape – as an extension of human beings – that most interests me. How architecture seems to envelop either to protect – as a womb – or to destroy – as an avalanche – highlights the human experiences depicted[12].

10. Berger 2013, page 32/226.

11. Berger 2013, page 33/226.

12. In "Architecture: Constructing Concrete Utopias" (2017), Petra Čeferin claims that "architecture – insofar as it is practised as a creative practice – is always, already, utopia realised" (137). The relationship between architecture and utopian thinking has a long tradition epitomized by the conceptualization of ideal cities by Classical and Renaissance thinkers, such as Plato, Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella. From these mental maps to geographic sites was but a step and several attempts to fulfil utopia through stone and mortar came to life. Robert Owen's New Lanark (Scotland), José Ferreira Pinto Basto's Vista Alegre Factory (Portugal), Le Corbusier's partially built Cité Frugès (France) and Lúcio Costa's planning of Brasilia (Brazil) are a few examples of these "concrete utopias". There are also architectural elements understood as dystopian both in fictional societies (e.g. Francis Bacon's Salomon's House) and in real ones (e.g. prisons, asylums and reformatories). Jeremy Bentham's panopticon inspired Michel Foucault's theory of the supervised society which denounced surveillance, order and discipline as tools of social control. These utopian/dystopian social architectures indicate how essential and ambivalent architecture and space are. They may be, at the same time, contemporary and transtemporal, in the sense that they are a reaction to their context. For the purposes of this article, however, it is the destruction of the architectural landscape and the way architecture may be (or reflect) a continuation of human experience that most interest me. In "Refectories and Dining Rooms as 'Social Structural Joints': On Space, Gender and Class in Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed", Mariana Oliveira, Miguel Ramalhete Gomes and I delved into the relationship between social spaces and power dynamics in Le Guin's critical utopia. For more information on architecture and utopian thinking, see "The Tectonic Structural Joint: Joining Architecture and Utopian Thinking" section (2019, 73-75).

Photoscape I – Revealing Hope (Early war and revolutionary optimism)

To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story
but to be able to call up a picture.

Susan Sontag (Regarding the Pain of Others, 2004)

Gerda Taro (1910–1937), an anarchist Jewish-German photographer, is considered the first photojournalist to be killed while "covering" a war. After being arrested in Germany for distributing propaganda against the Nazi party, she fled to Paris, where she came to meet Robert Capa, who became her professional and life partner. She was the greatest promoter of his work, writing to agencies to divulge his photographs and modelling for him. She also took photographs.

The transformative moment for both Taro and Capa was the Spanish Civil War. The photograph of a guerrilla man being shot, starting to fall back with his arms stretched upwards, attributed to Capa[13], has become the international symbol of the conflict and the resistance against fascism. Taro travelled twice to Spain during the war to find two very distinct countries. In 1936, Spain was a space of transformation and hope. She had arrived just after the battle of Barcelona, in which Republicans had vanquished the Nationalists. Taro photographed the militias, the men and women of the resistance, invigorated by the victory and the justice of their cause.

On her first visit to Spain, also her first experience as a photojournalist, Taro took photos very dissimilar from the ones which come to mind when we think about the Spanish Civil War. Very different photos from those evoked by Virginia Woolf, illustrated the horrible memories of Orwell, inspired Ernest Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls novel, or Pablo Picasso's Guernica mural.

For this case study, I selected a set of six photographs by Taro that predate the bloodiest battles. They depict militia women training for battle, such as the famous photograph of the militiawoman kneeling on the sand, training her aim, in heels; they represent the camaraderie between militia men and women; and, especially, they illustrate the joy and determination of both militias and civilians. Analysing these photographs by resorting to the ethics of seeing, they stand out as transtemporal, portraying an instantaneous moment from the past that still resonates a century after (time axis).

13. The authorship and authenticity of this photograph has been highly disputed though. Some critics believe that the photograph was in fact Taro's and might have been staged. .

They depict not only a specific historical Spanish context but also illustrate the web of international support from individuals and professionals who marched to help them (space axis). These photographs could not be perceived in any way neutral, since they are read as a political statement, not only an aesthetic one. The way the women are photographed in training or in uniform, and the civilians smiling, leads us to a pre-determined conclusion: this is the good cause, they are all in agreement, they are all mobilised in this fight against fascism (identity axis).

These Taro's photoscapes of militiamen and women training in cityscapes yet to be annihilated by the fascist weaponry are a memorial to hope; they were embodiments of revolution. These human bodies and urban spaces become subversive spaces. They are testimonies of those who fought against totalitarianism, men and women who stood shoulder to shoulder, preparing for battle. Like in death, there were no gender distinctions. Women fought in trousers and heels, sharing in the responsibility of the cause and also the joy. Taro's photographs are, thus, a synecdoche, representing all the hopeful resistance, a thread through the maze of those people's determination and blood, those men and women, young and old, native and foreigner, all brothers and sisters, fighting for a common cause: freedom.

Co-opting Berger's words and applying them to Taro's photoscapes here, Taro made a choice. She decided that she was testifying was worth recording. The degree to which she believed this was worth looking at could be judged by all that she was willing to show. We are arrested by the camaraderie and the shared goal of those photographed; we are captured by that intimacy, that experience unheard and unphotographed before. These photographs not only reflect the behaviour of those fighting against the fascists but are themselves radical weapons of and for the resistance — they are utopian instruments for change. Until it all changed...

Three Republican militiawomen, probably Barcelona © ICP International Center of Photography

Man and child in militia outfit, Barcelona © ICP International Center of Photography

Three Republican militiawomen, probably Barcelona © ICP International Center of Photography

Recruitment and training of the new People's Army, Valencia © ICP International Center of Photography

Photoscape I I– Reporting Destruction (Later war and civilian suffering)

> *This morning's collection contains the photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the 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 ...*
>
> *Virginia Woolf (Three Guineas, 1938)*[14]

Whereas, in 1936, Taro had revealed a utopian photoscape, of men, women and children animated by the possibility of change and the justice of their cause; on her second trip to the war zone, Taro encountered a desolate Spain. Utterly destroyed by the fratricidal conflict, Taro's photoscapes changed completely. She registered the dead civilians and their obliterated homes, whose flesh and mortar were so entangled together that they became part of the same mass. She gave presence to the shapeless: the refugees trying to escape the city and the corpses overflowing the morgues. These were the human and the city-maimed bodies described by Virginia Woolf. These were the photographs that came to evoke the Spanish Civil War for posterity.

There is a disturbing paradox in the act of photographing: its essence of non-intervention. Susan Sontag asserts that "Part of the horror (...) of contemporary photojournalism (...) comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life, to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record. The person who is recording cannot intervene"[15]. As mentioned before, what connects all elements of the ethics of seeing, and of utopianism as a lens over a lens, is "choice". To choose what, who and when to photograph. This also implies that recording something implies inaction on the part of the recorder. However, many might say that recording is, in itself, an intervening act. To report, to denounce, horrors is to intervene.

14. Virginia Woolf's connection with the Spanish Civil War was deeply personal. Julian Bell, her nephew, was an example of a young foreign volunteer who moved to Spain to help the fight against the fascists. Increasingly supportive of the socialist and anti-fascist movements, the young English poet enlisted in 1937. His parents and aunt dissuaded him from taking arms, so he worked as an ambulance driver on the Republican side instead. Only one month after travelling to Spain, Julian Bell found himself in the midst of battle, driving an ambulance for the British Medical Unit attached to the International Brigades at the Battle of Brunete. He was hit by bomb fragments on a road outside Villanueva de la Cañada, sustaining a massive lung wound. He later died in a military hospital at El Escorial. He was only 29.

15. Sontag 2011, page 11/153.

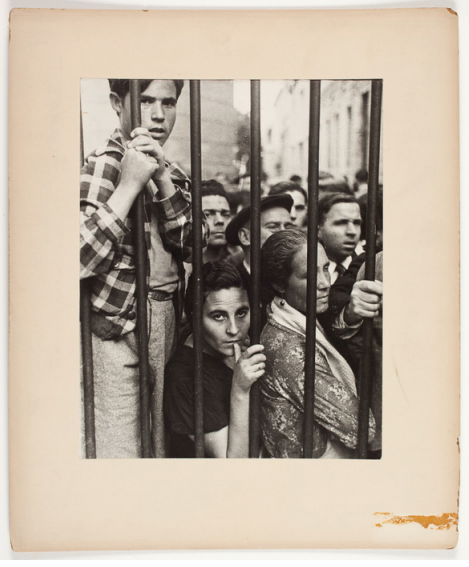
The set of photographs selected for Taro's destruction photoscape depicts – and at the same time – creates horror in the audience. Taro's unapologetic portrayals of women lying in the morgue and corpses scattered among rubble humanise the reports of war and their nameless casualties. Side-by-side with other voiceless victims – the unhoused, the refugees, the widows and the orphans – Taro's photographs of the dead remain at the same time timeless (time axis) and universal (space axis). Could these photoscapes – that at the time moved so much – be compared to the images we see every day on the news? Although today we are constantly being accosted by graphic images of war and destruction, that was not the case at the time. Publishing photographs of dystopian photoscapes was not only a subversive act but a hopeful one. It was an act filled with the conviction that such photographs and reports would instigate popular condemnation and pressure foreign governments, forcing them to act. That was certainly what intellectuals, writers, journalists, and photographers believed would happen.

However, could it not also trivialise violence? Turn it less powerful, less painful, to see? Turn us impervious and indifferent to the suffering of others? Apathic, in fact, as Sontag seems to denote in Regarding the Pain of Others? As she states, "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen"[16]. But if we are becoming every day more and more indifferent to the pain of others, where does it lead us? Could photographs, such as Taro's photoscapes, still move in any way? Sontag continues, "An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the great newspaper of record each morning, given the likelihood of seeing photographs that could make you cry. [However,] the pity and disgust (...) should not distract you from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown"[17]. This aspect highlights the critical element of the utopian lens (identity axis). Photographs are threads, as I alluded, to a maze of meanings. Always look for what lies beyond the surface, because photoscapes are multilayered, and even the most horror-provoking ones may instigate bold constructive action or, at least, critical questions.

Indeed, Gerda Taro's photographs are windows to a time and space remote from us, and yet they depict a reality that seems atemporal and transtemporal. The memories of war that these images evoke are universal and, in a way, also anonymous. That is what an ethics of seeing should prevent: photographs should haunt us, especially photoscapes such as these. The suffering portrayed should engulf us and move us to action, and, from an ethics of seeing, we should move to an ethics of intervening.

16. Sontag 2008, pages 11-12/91.

17. Sontag 2008, pages 11-12/91.



Crowd at the gate of the morgue after the air raid, Valencia, Spain © ICP International Center of Photography

Corpses in the morgue after the bombing, Valencia, Spain © ICP International Center of Photography

Body, La Granjuela, Cordoba front, Spain © ICP International Center of Photography

Children amid rubble of bombed buildings, La Granjuela, Cordoba front, Spain © ICP International Center of Photography

Seeing Back to Act Forward (Conclusion: ethics of seeing and acting)

> *Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.*
>
> *George Orwell (1946)*

By reading Gerda Taro's photoscapes and by putting hope and destruction in a productive tension, in this article, I propose an ''ethics of seeing'' that remains open-ended, acknowledging that the interpretation of such photographs continues to shift with time, context, and the engagement of their audiences. This last element is key. Taro's photoscopes benefited from but also fed upon a large engagement from the public, who were deeply mobilised by this political conflict.

The Spanish Civil War was a pivotal moment in European History. It was a stage for the art of war and the science of killing. It was also a test of the limits of foreign policy and international apathy. A dress rehearsal for the Second World War. A boost in confidence for the autocratic regimes. On the other hand, it is touching to look back and see the web of international solidarity formed by individuals – volunteers from every art and every part – who travelled to Spain and tried to do something while powerful political agents did nothing.

Writer Ernest Hemingway and reporter Martha Gellhorn travelled to Spain and became two of the most ferocious mouthpieces of the conflict, denouncing its atrocities. Gellhorn was a close friend of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, to whom she would write and correspond assiduously. In a letter to the First Lady, Gellhorn wrote: ''If the madman Hitler really sends two divisions to Spain my bet is that the war is nearer than even the pessimists thought''. In 1937, Gellhorn (and Hemingway) was in Spain filming a documentary with Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens about the war and submitting pieces of war correspondence about the people of Madrid to Collier's magazine. The documentary was shown at the White House in early July, and on a thank you note to Eleanor Roosevelt, Gellhorn described the impact the war had had on herself: ''I am so glad you let us come because I did want you to see that film. I can't look at it calmly, it makes it hard for me to breathe afterwards''. During the first months of 1938, she embarked on a tour to raise funding and awareness about the war and became very ill. However, in March, she was once again en route to Spain.

Aboard RMS Queen Mary, she wrote: ''The news from Spain has been terrible, too terrible, and I felt I had to get back. It is all going to hell... I want to be there, somehow sticking with the people who fight against Fascism... I do not manage to write anymore, except what I must to make money to go on living''.

This was the conflict that most mobilised individuals from Europe and North America based only upon ethical and political principles, either to fight or to report. One of those individuals to join the war effort and to die on the battlefield – in the aftermath of the Battle of Brunete – was Gerda Taro herself. As reported in Le Soir (27 July 1937) and then relayed in the Belfast Telegraph:

> During the fighting at Brunete on Sunday [25 July] Mlle. Taro rallied a retreating group of militia, and persuaded them to return to occupy one of the trenches, where they withstood an intense bombardment for an hour. When forced to retreat, Mlle. Taro jumped on the running board of a car. An insurgent tank rushing up to the lines emerged suddenly from a side road and collided with the car. Mlle. Taro was rushed to hospital at Escorial seriously hurt and given blood transfusion, but died yesterday morning.[18]

She was only 26, and her final act was not one of seeing and recording, but one of acting and intervening. Taro's political activism went further than what the lens of her camera could encompass and register, and she felt compelled to intervene, as her obituary testifies. Curiously, in 2017, a photograph of hers joined the photographs of those anonymous people whom she had forever captured[19], for hers was a paradigmatic case of cultural amnesia.

When a photograph of a young, anonymous woman on her deathbed at a hospital in Spain went viral, the woman was identified as Gerda Taro, the almost forgotten partner of Robert Capa, who also took photographs during the Spanish Civil War and died there. For many decades, many of her photographs were, in fact, attributed to Capa (although most likely not intentionally on his part). Her works were either lost or usurped, and so, she was doubly erased from cultural memory. Similar to the victims that she tried to immortalise in her photographs, who were made invisible by a fascist dictatorship, so was she almost made a shadow. Thanks to the incredible work of conservation and dissemination that the International Centre of Photography is doing, we finally have access to Taro's works. Her photographs are, in fact, both relevant and revolutionary testimonies of the fearless and unhesitant approach to early photojournalism.

18. "Woman Journalist Killed". Belfast Telegraph. 28 July 1937, page 4.

19. See the photograph of Gerda Taro being treated by Janos Kiszely, a volunteer doctor from Hungary published by the Guardian here: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/19/deathbed-photo-of-war-photographer-gerda-taro-discovered. Photograph: Picture supplied by John Kiszely

Furthermore, her work humanised war and its abstract casualties, as the Morgue's photographs are a great example of. On the other hand, Taro also represented the intimacy, camaraderie and beauty of a cause, exemplified by iconic (and aesthetically sophisticated) images such as the woman militia in heels.

Gerda Taro's photoscapes, as I called them, are time, space and identity capsules: a combination of multiple layers of meaning that invite critical thinking and the imagination to fill in the gaps. As John Berger and Susan Sontag constantly called attention to, we should see beyond the instant. That instant is relational, ambiguous and pervious to interpretation. The fact that the photographer became one of the nameless victims of the conflict she was covering is just another layer of meaning and tragedy. However, when injustice and violence demand confrontation, what else can we do but act? Martha Gellhorn, in one of the letters to Eleanor Roosevelt, wrote something that illustrates both Taro's photoscapes and her fate. Unburdening herself by the lack of a place where she could fit in and the difficulty of writing while other people faced the horrors of the war, Gellhorn said: "now maybe the only place at all [to be] is in the front lines, where you don't have to think, and can simply (and uselessly) put your body up against what you hate". Like Martha Gellhorn's words still shock us, so should Gerda Taro's photoscapes still haunt us and compel us to act against injustice.

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