Aesthetics of the Spanish Civil War in Laurie Lee's *A Moment of War*[1]

AYŞE NAZ BULAMUR

Abstract

This article examines how Laurie Lee's memoir *A Moment of War* (1991) textually constructs the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) that ended with Franco's dictatorship. An art lover, the narrator, crosses the Pyrenees into Spain with his books, cameras, and violin to fight against the Nationalists. His references to literature, music, and photography reflect his complex identity as an artist and a soldier. Artifice lies at the heart of history as the war is photographed, broadcasted, and narrated as the clash of epic and comedy. The war that coincides with the rise of photojournalism emerges as verbal snapshots of perplexed soldiers, an exciting but thrilling air raid, and art like women. Lee's memoir that brings together verbal, aural, and written texts refrains from anti-war propaganda. Aesthetics and politics are not oppositional as Walter Benjamin assumes, but mutually constitutive as the meeting of comedy and epic shatters heroism. The narrator discredits his own objectivity by questioning his depictions of Spain as fairyland and women as paintings. The memoir that reflects on its fictionality minimizes the importance of the only internal conflict during the interwar era in twentieth-century Europe and renders it interchangeable with any other battle in time and space.

Key Words: Laurie Lee, Spanish Civil War, aesthetics, memoir, twentieth-century English literature

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Laurie Lee's memoir *A Moment of War* (1991) aestheticizes the Spanish Civil War[2] (1936-1939) between the Republicans and the Nationalists that resulted in Francisco Franco's dictatorship. Fifty-two years after the conflict, Lee's war veteran narrator—a British art aficionado who joins the Spanish Civil War as part of the International Brigades, i.e. *Brigades Internacionales*—highlights the unreliability of his textually constructed memories. Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* argues that history, like literature, is composed through speculative narratives: "The past really did exist, but we can 'know' that past today only through its texts, and therein lies its connection to the literary" (128). The Spanish Civil War takes on a literary dimension as Lee's first-person narrator frames the conflict through a clash between the comedy and epic genres, denying the ability for heroism to define masculinity. The narrator's verbal snapshots of perplexed soldiers, thrilling air raids, and art-like women are not authentic. He is not a photojournalist but a storyteller who portrays Spain as a medieval fairyland of castles. Artifice shapes history when the narrator's radio show reduces the internal conflict during the interwar era to a poetry reading. As a witness to the war, the narrator defies readers' expectations of accuracy by portraying Spain's civil upheaval through a range of aesthetic and

2. Helen Graham compares the revolt against the Spanish Republic to "the fascist takeovers" of "Mussolini in Italy (1922) and Hitler in Germany (1933)." She argues that "culture wars" unleashed the military coup on 17 July 1936: urban culture versus rural tradition; "secular against religious; authoritarianism against liberal political cultures;" "traditional gender roles versus the 'new woman'; even youth against age, since generational conflicts were also present" (1-2). For a historical synopsis of the Spanish Civil War, also see the books of Stanley Payne and Michael Seidman.

media forms (literary genres, photography, paintings, and a radio broadcast) dominated by the male gaze.

A Moment of War, as a memoir, is an artifact documenting the experiences of an unconventional soldier: an art lover who travels with his books, cameras, and violin to join foreign volunteers in Spain's war against the fascists. The unconventional aspects of the narrator's dual artist/soldier identity subvert his ability to be perceived as a traditional hero by people in his proximity, including his fellow soldiers. Notably, Captain Perez discredits the narrator's story of crossing the Pyrenees into Spain while carrying a musical instrument. Perez treats the artist/soldier as an impostor who fools everyone with his "phony" passports. Labeling books, violin, and camera as "circus equipment[s]" (7-8), Perez associates art with animal-tamer and fighting acts, which Victorians dismissed as "vulgar" working-class interests (e.g. Tait). The narrator, however, takes revenge for the humiliation he experiences by using the memoir to mock Perez's ignorance and laziness. Still, the artist/soldier with dubious fighting skills is eventually assigned to the Madrid radio station rather than the combat zone. In the live broadcast, the artist/soldier acts like a troubadour—a medieval lyric poet who praises knights. Art and history coincide when the artist/soldier's poetry recital continues despite the disruptions from bombing, broken glass, and the shaking studio walls. The artist/soldier turns the war into an intertextual canvas that showcases his identity as a radio host, poet, and musician.

Through a third identity—as a photographer, the narrator

captures "a moment of war" that evokes timeless fairy tales that start with the phrase "once upon a time." The narrator's recollections of his "moment of magical arrival" (17) render Spain a fantasy world rather than a war zone. The war is framed as a mysterious tale when the narrator remembers walking through the "forbidden" road and "huge nail-studded doors" of the 18th-century Figueras fortress (16). He creates an enchanting atmosphere with picturesque words that describe mountains reflecting light like a broken glass, land sinking in "frozen waves," and the castle lifting in "pure air" (17). With its "blue air," "cold clear sky," "violet sea" (17), and burning light, the landscape of Figueras evokes a palette of colored photographs rather than the volunteers' entry point into Spain. Once "a show of force," the fortress presumably becomes a "theatrical" site that stages the war with white and blue lights (16). The narrator deprives Spain its sociopolitical agency by adapting his war experience into a series of photogenic images.

Spain's medieval land of castles is not the setting of an epic—a narrative poem that celebrates heroic deeds—but a comedy stand-up routine. Here soldiers are comedians with "nervous jerking heads" who tell "self-effacing jokes" (32)—not heroes. "Alcoholics" and "dreamy undergraduates" comprise the company of clumsy soldier-comedians who destroy the fantasy of exemplary heroes by whining about their financial or marital problems (32). When Spanish civilians laugh at the soldiers exhibit drowsy behavior during the morning parade, the combat zone becomes a stage for comedic performances. Prominent during this performance is the British Communist Party's leader, Harry Pollitt. Pollitt is not a hero but "a minotaur" (65), a half-bull, half-

human creature, killed by the Athenian prince, Theseus, in Greek mythology. Pollitt's appraisal of the British as "heroic defenders of democracy, champion fighters against [f]ascist hordes" (65) does not inspire self-sacrifice in soldiers who beg to be sent back home. The soldiers' initial desire to become chivalric heroes falls apart due to their treatment as disposable items "being carried to a dumping ground" (41) or prisoners with tattered uniforms. The cross-genre merging of epic and comedy shows how the soldiers' fear of death is silenced in historical narratives that encourage men to sacrifice their lives for the nation.

Rather than soldiers, white European male artists—who render women passive entities instead of political agents—are the heroes of Lee's intertextual memoir. Women are conspicuously absent in the narrative. Instead, the war becomes imagined through the works of French painter Gustave Doré, Victorian novelist Charles Dickens, German composer Ludwig van Beethoven, and Greek painter El Greco. The male-dominated artistic scene ignores how female novelists portray gender inequality during the upheaval. For example, Maria Barbal's *Stone in a Landslide* (1985) and Mercè Rodoreda's *The Time of the Doves* (1962) focus on the war's unseen female agents. These works empower silenced Spanish women by letting an orphan girl or a widowed mother narrate their own predicaments. Both authors locate the civil war not at the front but in oppressive marriages. Lee's narrator, however, dismisses how female writers, politicians, and journalists fight against Franco and his fascist army. Carmen Ayerra and Gina Herrmann, for example, celebrate the female guerrillas' anti-fascist struggle that is left out of historiographies. The narrator,

conversely, minimizes women's achievements by comparing a military woman to a child "riding a miniature bicycle" (74). Lee's narrator supports the traditional assumption that war is a masculine discourse by rewriting the battle with respect to the works of male artists.

A Moment of War ignores women, yet *A Moment of War* is itself left out of literary studies alongside Brian Shelmerdine's book *British Representations of the Spanish Civil War*. Scholars primarily focus on Lee's love life and family history (e.g. Grove, Cavalerie), his interest in food studies (Freeman), his documentary on Cyprus (Campbell), and his earlier autobiographies, *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* (Threadgould) and *Cider with Rosie* (Tarbitt). Few references to *A Moment of War* do not analytically engage with the memoir's representation of war: Iman Farouk El Bakary briefly comments on Lee's memoir, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, and Samuel Barber's music "Adagio for Strings" as war witnesses. Verlyn Klinkenborg of *New York Times* and Terry Potter of *The Letterpress Project* label the book a "bleak monument" and a "sobering" portrait of "confusion, dirt, discomfort." Although Speer Morgan considers the undiscovered memoir a "sleeping classic," Morgan does not examine how Lee's "compelling imagery" (203) aestheticizes the war. This article contributes to literary scholarship on Laurie Lee by examining, for the first time, how *A Moment of War* represents the Spanish Civil War through the narrator's artistic and literary lens.

This study focuses on war aesthetics that deviates from the book reviews that judge *A Moment of War* on the grounds of

authenticity. Simon Courtauld of *The Spectator* quotes the British commander Bill Alexander's assertion that the book is "mostly pure fantasy" because Lee "was sent back to England without ever going to a war zone" due to his epilepsy. He claims that Lee's dates of arrival, imprisonment, and his stay in Figueras do not match in a fabricated narrative. Mordecai Richler defends Lee in the *Toronto Star* that "Writers don't lie, they have poetic licence to invent truths" while recalling the distant past. What distinguishes Lee from many other British veterans of the Spanish Civil War is that he does not present his memoir as testimony. Walter Gregory, for example, provides statistics, dates, and city maps that attest to the truth of his memoir, *The Shallow Grave* (1996). Jack Jones, in his Foreword, recommends *A Moment of War* for history students; *London Review*, on the book cover, praises the text as a "piece of oral history." Unlike Gregory, Lee does not claim authenticity; instead, he reflects on the discursivity of his autobiographical and fictional narrative, shaped by visual, aural, and written texts.

Literary scholars have not analyzed literary representations of the Spanish Civil War with respect to Walter Benjamin's warning against the aestheticization of war in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." A year before the upheaval, Benjamin criticized the pro-fascist poets for branding war as beautiful and celebrating machinery as a sign of modernization. Benjamin attacks fascism that renders war aesthetic and states that "communism responds by politicizing art" (287). In *A Moment of War*, aesthetics and politics are not oppositional as Benjamin assumes, but mutually constitutive. The text that turns the upheaval into a media event, literary genre, and snapshots neither celebrates

tanks as markers of progress nor preaches anti-war propaganda. The selected verbal and visual war images are artistically crafted. Unlike the pro-fascist poets whom Benjamin warns readers against, Lee renders aesthetics political by highlighting how our perception of the war is mediated by art and literature that reflect gender or nationalist ideologies. The meeting of comedy and epic shatters heroic ideals, whereas the images of art-like women minimize their roles as political agents. The depiction of Spain as a "primitive" (117) fairyland, however, locates the nation in the Dark Ages. An eyewitness to the war, the narrator discredits his own objectivity by drawing attention to his identity as an artist. Aesthetics that has been discussed in war photography (e.g. Labanyi, Grass, Faber) is often ignored in literary studies that examine the Spanish war in relation to its political impact (e.g. Perez and Aycock, Ugarte), the sublime (Asín), Ernest Hemingway's novels (e.g. White), and children's literature (e.g. Roig Rechou and Kenfel). Useful as these analyses are, they do not consider how the upheaval itself can be reproduced as an artwork. The following four sections examine how Lee's war memoir that blurs lines between history and storytelling is a selective, partial, and hence artistic account of the past.

The Battle of Epic and Comedy

The war representation that connects epic and comedy renders epic ideals absurd rather than lofty. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defines epic as a long narrative poem that praises the noble and legendary defenders of religion and community with ornate speech. Aristotle privileges epic over

comedy, "representation of people, who are rather inferior" and "laughable" due to "a sort of error and ugliness" in their character (94). Lee's narrator, however, finds the ridiculous and ugly in war that is glorified in the epic. The upheaval becomes a comic device as soldiers with "blue bullet like faces" (48) look like Smurfs or gnomes. War injury is not a grand gesture of self-sacrifice when a man loses an arm due to "fat serrano ham" that the bombers drop on the city (99). The class distinctions between epic and comedy fall apart as "shivering and ragged" soldiers are not taken seriously (83). The passive voice highlights the lack of agency of the "invisible" volunteers, who are "received" in the Albacete train station and "trundled towards" (41) their military camp. The battle of epic and comedy genres renders the civil war a literary narrative rather than a historical event.

The "uneasy" volunteers evoke Victorian poet Matthew Arnold's "ignorant armies clash by night" (1040) in "Dover Beach" (1867). The poem's incertitude and restlessness extend to the 1930s that witnessed the First World War and the Spanish Civil War. "What was I doing in these Spanish mountains, anonymous of purpose, […]?" (107), the narrator asks, wondering why he is fighting in a battle that does not affect his nation. The narrator's unguided and perplexed fellows do not know what they are preparing for while they repeatedly clean their guns in a training camp. The narrator shares Arnold's loss of faith in war as killing a stranger leaves him in the dark. His victim's panicky eyes leave the narrator "in a state of sick paralysis," suffering from "hallucinations and breaks in the brain" (112). The narrator's epic dream to make a grand "gesture of personal sacrifice and faith"

(33) falls apart as he realizes that killing "an unknown young man in a blur of panic" (112) is not chivalric but absurd.

Lee's narrator breaks Arnold's "eternal note of sadness" (1039). The civil war turns out to be not an "Olympian battle" (53) of mighty Greek gods but "dark little games" without "the stamp of reason" (73). The soldiers with "sleepy eyes" (7) and "grotesque and scruffy" (14) guards fit the definition of comedy rather than the epic genre that requires the presence of admirable characters. "Brave but bewildered amateurs" (33) or "furious little Catalan[s]" (40) are presented like children who pretend to be gallant heroes. The belittlement of soldiers as vulnerable kids recalls Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade* (1969), which transforms the bombing of Dresden in the Second World War into the children's crusade Vonnegut references in the novel's often omitted secondary title. In Lee's memoir, representations of the fascists as "ice-cream-lolly boys" or "kindergarten cut-throats" (55) and the barefoot officer in pajamas and odd slippers as a "little boy" (59) do not inspire awe but laughter. The soldiers resemble lazy students while they enjoy "long hours of idle chatter" (33) and play cards at the military camp. The social distinction between the noble warriors and ordinary civilians falls apart as both are reduced to timid and "unchecked children" (61) of the comedy played in Spain.

The upheaval recalls the gesture-based performances in shadow theatre and the silent films of Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) that entertain audiences of all ages. The narrator compares his comrades to fictional characters, who express their emotions

not with words but gestures: “I can’t, at this length of time, recall all the characters in the group; many are shapes in a shadow play only” (69). The alleged freedom fighters are merely anonymous “shapes” that he cannot fully remember due to his fading memory. The “faceless” (41) and nameless soldiers resemble the cut-out figures or puppets reflected on the wall or curtain. The source of power is invisible and anonymous as the puppeteer, who holds the strings of translucent shapes. The drowsy Polish American Commander Caplin, in a Siberian hat, looks like a comedian rather than a leader, whose surname evokes the aforementioned English comedian and filmmaker Charlie Chaplin. Commander Caplin chooses art over war when he leaves his crew parading in the plaza so Caplin may visit the cinema and later write poetry. The text highlights the performativity of the war that turns conflict into a shadow play where soldiers are puppets for children’s amusement.

Unlike comedy and epic, Lee’s non-progressive narrative does not end with triumph or resolution. Instead, the Spanish Civil War becomes a gothic character that haunts the memoir’s publication date in 1991. Walter Benjamin asks in “On the Concept of History,” “Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well?” (390) and highlights the dialogue between different time periods. The German philosopher imagines the past like a specter that lingers in the present. The ghost-like snow in *A Moment of War* also highlights the presence of the civil war in the late twentieth century:

> When a shell hit the ground and exploded near by, the snow rose in the air like a dirty ghost, and hung there spikily

> billowing, before collapsing into the ground again. Such apparition increased all around me, lifting, hovering and falling, together with the brutal rending and peeling back of the air, and the knowledge that under bombardment one has no courage. (109)

"At war with itself," Spain seems to be usurped by a self-specter that is quiet but ghastly like snowflakes. "The ghostly aura of incense" has "impregnated the walls" (78) of the medieval Tarazona Cathedral, a shelter for soldiers. A symbol of fertility, impregnation does not give birth to a new order but a purgatory state between life and death. The "extremely thin and bony," and skeleton-like chapel does not promise resurrection. The half-burnt church's current inhabitants resemble zombies: the "bright-eyed" nuns look "mummified" and a veteran in a fever has a "cadaverous face" (78). The civil war here achieves immortality through gothic art as the "ghostly fog" (111), deadly cold, fatal sound of aircraft, suffocating tranquility, and shroud-like snow haunt him even fifty years after the upheaval.

The Photogenic War

Lee's vivid images work as snapshots of the Spanish Civil War, "the first war to be witnessed ('covered') in the modern sense," i.e. "by a corps of professional photographers" (Sontag 86). In her 2002 *New Yorker* article, Susan Sontag connects visual and written texts, both of which are metaphorical and discursive:

> Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image.

> […] The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall. (87)

For Sontag, a photographer is a "literalist" (90) who composes and arranges historical events within a certain frame. Having arrived in Spain with his camera, Lee's narrator captures the scenes he believes to be "worth recording" (39). He shoots Spain, in its worst winter, as a "freeze frame" or a non-progressive country at a standstill. The stock photos of "iced winter morning," "glassy rocks," and "snow-covered" (5) empty villages exclude the political turbulence in Valencia that is stuck in time. The paralyzing war's "motionless silence" (2) and "stupefying numbness" (5) mute the "steady roar" of the bombs, "hysterical clamour," and "frantic outburst of fire" (36-37). The narrator's verbal snapshots of the smothering winter usurp Spain's life energy to resemble a "frozen cadaver" (59). The war seems as performative as the Republican family, who huddles "together like a family photograph" while posing with their "glassy teeth-set smiles" when they welcome the narrator into Spain (2).

The uncaptioned war photographs in media shape the narrator's perception of the upheaval that seems interchangeable with any other battle in time and space. In the context of the Balkan wars, Sontag writes that combat pictures are generic and that the same images of killed children were passed around at "both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings" (86). The civil war loses its cultural and historical specificity as the unidentified bombardment photos frame the narrative:

> We'd already seen posters and photographs of what bombs could do to a city, slicing down through apartment blocks, leaving all their intimacies exposed—the wedding portrait on the wall, the cheap little crucifix, the broken bed hanging bare to the streets—the feeling of whole families huddled together in their private caves being suddenly blasted to death in one breath. (37)

Sontag compares "sheared-off buildings" to "body parts" (83). The narrator, however, creates the illusion of social and familial bonds in the midst of civil strife. The collapsed apartment walls expose wedding portraits that are markers of perfect bliss. The devastation inspires love as the crucifix symbolizes the Holy Spirit that unites the family members. The victims seem to have made the vow, "Till death do us part," as they die huddling together "in one breath." Ironically, the emblem of marriage as a lifetime commitment was shattered four years before the upheaval in 1932, when divorce was legalized. His comparison of apartment units to "private caves," conversely, situates modern Spain in a distant past, thereby erasing its political existence in the 1930s. The anonymous war photographs in the media inspire the myth of social unity in Spain that is at war with itself.

The narrator's mental snapshots of the air raid evoke oppositional sentiments of dread and delight. Sontag writes that "The hunt for more dramatic […] images drives the photographic enterprise" and "shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption" (87). Lee's narrator derives "queer satisfaction" from watching a live horror show that provides "new images of

outrage" (37-38) for his camera:

> As the bombers closed in, spreading their steady roar above us, I felt a quick surge of unnatural excitement. […] This was my first air-raid, and I wanted to meet it by myself, to taste the full brunt of it without fuss or panic. […] New images of outrage which Spain was the first to show us, and which some idiot way I was impatient to share. (37)

The air raid is the leading actor of the war that becomes reduced to a theatrical spectacle. The narrator is stimulated by the loud air raid that he identifies as a person he wants to meet by himself once the show is over. The narrator's word choice "taste," rather than "experience," implies his treatment of the bombing as an aesthetic encounter. Once a passive observer of war photographs in the newspapers, the narrator creates his own images that he is "impatient to share" so as to thrill his readers. Sontag states representing war "in words or in pictures requires a keen, unflinching detachment" (93). The narrator, too, is a detached spectator, who watches the "air-raid on Valencia with curiosity but otherwise no emotion" (38). The narrator's lack of fear or pity for the "panicky" victims prevents the narrative from being tragic (37). The war ceases to be dramatic when he self-reflexively admits that his representation of the bombing as an exciting spectacle is "idiotic" and "unnatural" (37). His detachment from the suffering and chaos highlights his role as an artist who crafts and shapes the war with his words.

The actual war becomes an action thriller when the narrator captures the death of a film lover advised to take shelter in the

movie theatre he attends every afternoon. As if in a film set, the victim's nephew (the railwayman) and the narrator calmly watch the man burn in his warehouse. Listless to his cry for help, the narrator acts like a director filming the fire scene with slow-motion:

> The roofs collapsed suddenly, sending a skirt of sparks riffling across the road. The old man's cries ceased, and we staggered back while great curling flames took over. 'The fault is his,' said the railwayman. 'He would have been safe in the cine. He used to go there every afternoon.' He stood doubled up, staring furiously at the blazing ruin, his clothes smoking, his hands hanging black and helpless. (39)

A film-lover's death becomes the film itself when the narrator zooms into the burning warehouse. Contrary to Benjamin's advice, the narrator does not use the close-up technique as a wake-up call against the horrors of war but to turn the upheaval into a spectacle. The narrator focuses on details not to claim objectivity but to reflect on his mediated knowledge of the civil war. The close-ups of the burning man, "the tearing shriek," "a moaning woman," "crackling flames and the distant bells of a fire-engine" (38-39) are not used for anti-war propaganda. A passive observer of the calamity, the narrator does not foster any political action. Ironically, the railwayman blames not the politicians but his dead uncle for not taking refuge in the magical world of the movie theatre. The precise images of mass destruction do not attack the machinery or the "imperialistic warfare," as Benjamin hopes (287), but establish the calm and rational narrator's superiority over the

"furious" and "helpless" railwayman. His subjective cinematic gaze challenges Benjamin's belief in the power of film to serve as "historical testimony" (283) and enrich our critical awareness of political injustice.

Spanish Women as Artworks

The narrator has the voyeuristic fantasy of Spanish women as passive artworks rather than political agents. As Laura Mulvey reveals in *Visual and Other Pleasures* when she critiques the treatment of women as aesthetic objects for men's enjoyment:

> They [women] are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade [i.e. the space where women find themselves exhibited across the course of their daily lives] has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery … (13)

The Spanish Civil War is reduced to a homogenously masculine "parade" that presumably has nothing to do with female nurses or journalists at the combat zone. The narrator's male gaze deprives women of agency by treating them as beautiful sceneries or stock characters. Lee's female characters have an ambivalent status between art and life, evoking the chiaroscuro paintings or the colorful, exotic Persian prints. For example, the narrator's sexualization of a young Spanish waitress, Eulalia, as a "magnetic" or "lyric-shaped" figure (67) dismisses her active participation

in the upheaval by hiding fugitives in her house. However, the narrator also minimizes his voyeuristic power by reversing the gaze and becoming a little man, instead of a courageous soldier, in the eyes of the young Spanish woman.

The mourning women at the train station, for the narrator, evoke the paintings of French artist Gustave Doré (1832-1883), an illustrator of classical works such as the Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Having been stripped of its historical context, here women's suffering becomes a universal theme of art:

> A sombre, Doré-like scene with which I was to become familiar—the old women in black, watching with watery eyes, speechless, like guardians of the dead; the girls holding out small shrunken oranges as their most precious offerings; the boys stiff and serious, with their clenched fists raised. The station was a heavy monochrome of black clothes and old iron, lightened here and there by clouds of wintry steam. (34)

Transformed into a monochrome black-and-white photograph, the train station is a frozen image rather than an active site that rescues civilians from their besieged city. The platform evokes Doré's chiaroscuro paintings when the mist enlightens the black atmosphere with subtle gradations of light and shade. The narrator pictures the station with eerie clouds as a temple where girls hold oranges as "precious offerings," and women are "like guardians of the dead" (34). The romanticization of women as mythical figures dismisses their desperate efforts to survive. To restate Mulvey, "The true exhibit is always the phallus" (13). The narrator instead

depicts the “stiff and serious” boys and not their mothers with “watery eyes” to be the forerunners of the show (34). The narrator mutes the haste and bustle of the train station by turning it into an artifact and by comparing “speechless” women to the figures in paintings (34).

Eulalia’s body is displayed like an artwork with rich and contrasting colors. Mulvey states that in male narratives, “the woman’s body exists as the erotic, spectacular and exhibitionist ‘other’” (162). The Spanish woman’s brown skin with purple bruises reminds Lee’s narrator of a colorful Persian print with floral motifs or geometrical designs:

> Her thin dancer’s body was now almost bare to the waist and revealed all the wispy fineness of a Persian print. It seemed that in some perverse way she wished to show both her beauty and its blemishes. Or perhaps she didn’t care. (25)

The narrator imagines the abused waitress as a seductive dancer and her scars as decorative motifs in a delicate Persian print. What is “perverse” (25) is not Eulalia's alleged desire to reveal herself to a soldier, but his reading of her wounded body as an aesthetic object. Her medical self-treatment turns into an erotic show. He is turned on with her sighs of pain while she loosens her “tight black dress” and pours “brandy over her bare bruised shoulder” (24). Although he despises her boss, Don Felipe, for “viciously” pinching her shoulder, he, too, dehumanizes her as “a slim gliding figure” (24). He self-reflexively destroys his own erotic fantasy by noting that perhaps she never intended to show her body.

Nevertheless, he silences Eulalia, who hides fugitives in her house, by aestheticizing her suffering and by rendering her into a fragile artwork.

Eulalia is delicate as a Persian print but sharp as "slivers of painted glass" (24). The young waitress is presumably an unreliable "exotic" woman, who is both fragile and dangerous like an invisible glass with sharp edges. The narrator suspects her of murdering her abuser and leaving Figueras to be a soldier in Madrid:

> I kill him
>
> Who?
>
> The old one. The grandfather. He maltreats…Thank God for the war. (26)

The woman warrior avenging her mistreatment evokes the biblical Judith, who saved the Jews from the Assyrians by slaying their commander-in-chief, Holofernes (Crone 56). The Austrian painter Gustav Klimt turns the devout heroine into an alluring vamp in *Judith I* (1901). Lee's narrator objectifies Eulalia, who prays to God for the war, as a seductive murderess. Her eyes—slivers of painted glass—resemble Klimt's shimmering and mosaic-like artwork. The "half-dressed" waitress with "loose hair" and yearning eyes (26) recalls Klimt's Judith experiencing orgasmic pleasure upon grabbing Holofernes's severed head right under her breast. As with the beheaded general, only the head of the murdered innkeeper is described in the memoir. No one investigates the killer of the shameless man, whose death is

celebrated in the tavern. The narrator, however, undercuts Eulalia's power by calling her "*my* murderous little dancer [emphasis not in original text]" (31). The narrator maintains his male sovereignty by claiming the ownership of the "rare" and exotic dancer, a black greyhound to be tamed.

Eulalia, however, refuses to subordinate to the narrator, who, like "the brutal big of an innkeeper" (27), wants to possess her like an artifact. When their paths cross in Tarazona, the "little dancer" belittles the Englishman, who she calls as "Lorenzo—little Frenchman" and "my little French brother" (66). The narrator's presumed authority collapses when she does not even remember the "poor" man's name or nationality. Like the narrator, who depicts the mourning Spanish women as sad figures in nineteenth-century French paintings, Eulalia too dismisses the narrator's cultural background by repeatedly mistaking him for a Frenchman. The short-haired woman in uniform shatters his sexual thrill of being imprisoned by a *femme fatale* through looking at his eyes "tenderly" and calling him "little blond man," "young, so young" (26). His fantasy of being chained by a snake-like woman does not match his childlike treatment. Although the narrator lets Eulalia question his heroism, Eulalia remains a figurant rather than an active participant in the civil war.

War as Radio Broadcast

The memoir again denies women's active roles as agents through how Lee's narrator depicts their relationship with radio. Women are depicted as listeners—not presenters—of the radio show broadcasted from the "half-besieged" (86) capital city

of Madrid to the United States by an American, Captain Sam of Albacete, and the British narrator. History writing becomes scriptwriting as the two producers plan the flow of the program that consists of "chatty interviews, propaganda, and 'culture'" (91). The live broadcast is an art production that is edited, rehearsed, and staged: "Captain Sam had been busy scribbling notes on his knee. We went over them together, suspicious and watchful. I added a few bits of my own, and smiling Sam cut them out. This was to be the script for our broadcast tonight" (87). Their script functions as a patchwork they "stitched up together" (92) to praise Lincoln Brigade Heroes, Americans, who volunteered to fight against Franco. The text mocks the tipsy cohosts, who mix up the socialist anthem "The Internationale" with French composer Emile Waldteufel's "The Skater's Waltz" (1882)—the latter of which evokes ice skaters on the frozen Seine River in Paris. The waltz that recalls the ballroom dance and its elite circle destroys the program's left-wing vibe that revolts against oppression. Their inability to orchestrate the radio show undermines the British and the Americans' authority as scriptwriters of the war.

The cohosts' call for help and solidarity has no addressee as Americans, uninterested in European politics, are more engaged in football than the Spanish Civil War. For the narrator, these Americans—"bored barmen," "husbands seeking the evening sports news" or "awaiting their lovers,"—might accidentally tune into Madrid Radio (92). The war becomes reduced to a temporary amusement. The narrator discredits the radio show's function to deliver political propaganda: "I doubt that they could, or would, or did" listen (92). Much like his uncertain audience across the

continent, the narrator is distant from the war that he treats as sports entertainment. As the *Daily Worker*'s editor Bill Rust, triumphantly announces the "most hopeful moment of the winter," the narrator compares him to "a football manager whose team had just won the cup" (84). He reduces the news to "a tale of victory" (84) that pleases the football fans. The comparison of the civil war to a national football game renders the battle a spectacle that mostly men enjoy while eating snacks and cheering for their team.

The inaudible radio show cannot deliver a message due to the unplugged microphones of the cohosts, who resemble mime artists communicating with their hand gestures and face expressions. The narrator remarks, "I had a feeling that we could not be heard at all, […] that this was all a pantomime to placate the gods" (92). He recalls the pantomime performances of the Early Imperial era when solo and mute dancers enacted moral stories in religious festivals (Jory 148). The shelling that interjects the broadcast becomes the musical component of the pantomime as "a distant metallic bark," uproar of explosion, "shouts, running feet," and "distant cries" (93) resemble the sound effects of percussion and drums. The war turns artistic as the dusty studio's broken glass, the shaking walls, and the juggling furniture intensify the tension of the live horror show. The air raid that causes mass destruction is treated like a theatrical device that authenticates the musical and dramatic spectacle.

The radio show resembles a religious ritual as the cohosts act as divine figures who magically rescue the civilians by welcoming them to their studio:

> If we have to die, let us die where there is light, among each other, and near the power of these men talking a kind of Latin, like priests. So in this cramped semi-basement […] we talked on, read poems, swinging the microphone between us, while large frightened eyes of the women stared up at our mouths as if we were conjuring for them, in our foreign tongues, magic spells, incantations, and prayers. (93)

The narrator elevates himself and his co-host, Sam, to the position of priests, conjuring frightened women with their foreign English tongues that resemble Latin. However, he also questions their alleged god-like authority by noting that the audience is untouched by their poetry recital that cannot silence the passing shells. The mothers gaze at the narrator, who amateurishly plays old Spanish songs with his violin, "as though watching a neighbor's child just beginning to walk" (94). The narrator is not the violin virtuoso Sam introduces him to be but a beginner, who plays the song too fast and loud. The studio's location "in a dank dark basement in a Victorian-style tenement" (91) also resists the myth of the two Western cohosts brightening their environment with hope.

The cramped studio is a theatre that stages a revenge drama between the narrator and Sam, who once wrongfully arrested the British volunteer for being a fascist agent and imprisoned him in a dark, tiny cell. The narrator takes his vengeance on Sam by picturing him as an unreliable cohost, whose personality suffers from a "cardinal breakdown" (92). He unravels the hypocrisy of the American, "the ice-cold political killer" (92), who excessively

and superficially flatters his courage to secretly cross the Pyrenees. "The merciless interrogator of spies" (92) is mocked as a fickle character in a mental crisis. The narrator takes revenge on Sam for cutting his lines during the rehearsal by turning him into an "unctuous crawler" (92) in his memoir. "This fawning Sam was an unsettling experience" (92), he states, and reverses the power dynamics as the censured interviewee becomes the author of *A Moment of War*. The narrator's continuous battle with his own imprisoner in 1991 reduces the Spanish Civil War into a revenge tragedy.

An Aestheticized History that Resists Closure

Intertextual recollections of the past in *A Moment of War* represent the Spanish Civil War as an aesthetic experience rather than a historical event. As a photographer, the narrator freezes moments of war with his verbal snapshots, depicting Spain as an enchanting setting rather than a combat zone. The narrator's war narrative is as staged as his rehearsed radio broadcast of a violin recital and poetry reading in the Madrid studio. His music and poetry, however, do not make the narrator a troubadour who celebrates the deeds of heroes. Instead, the narrator demystifies the glory of being a war veteran as the narrator regards his decision to join the upheaval as idiotic rather than heroic. Lee's narrator is no savior of the Republicans from the fascists but "a child just learning to speak" (3). The memoir does not end with the narrator carrying out courageous acts but the Political Commissar of Tarazona's decision to send the narrator back to London, where he

can be more useful as an artist: "You could write about us, make speeches, paint posters—or something…" (113). The incomplete sentence that ends with a pause renders the narrator's artistic talents as dubious as his contribution to the civil war. Although the narrator caricaturizes the heroic ideals, he nevertheless endorses the commonly held belief that war is a male discourse. The narrator imagines the past exclusively through the works of male artists and overlooks Spanish women's achievements by stereotyping a military woman as a *femme fatale*. While highlighting the mediated nature of war representation, the framing of the upheaval as a collage of chiaroscuro paintings, literary genres, a radio show, and art-like women renders the 1930s Spain as immobile and passive as an artwork.

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