



The World Wars Through the Female Gaze

By Associate Professor Jean Gallagher

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For some women writers and photographers during the two world wars—Edith Wharton, Mildred Aldrich, Martha Gellhorn, Lee Miller, H.D., and Gertrude Stein—the construction of the female subject as an observer of combat became a vital concern. Their explorations of vision took place against the backdrop of a larger shift in Western culture's understanding of what "seeing" meant in common practice and philosophical discourse alike. The role of visuality in their lives was massively transformed not only by the rigid gender roles of war but by the introduction of new combat practices and technologies such as aerial surveillance, trench warfare, and civilian bombardment.

In *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, Jean Gallagher maps one portion of the historicized, gendered territory of what Nancy K. Miller calls the "gaze in representation." Expanding the notion of the gaze in critical discourse, Gallagher situates a number of visual acts within specific historic contexts to reconstruct the wartime female subject. She looks at both the female observer's physical act of seeing—and the refusal to see—for example, a battlefield, a wounded soldier, a torture victim, a national flag, a fashion model, a bombed city, or a wartime hallucination.

The book begins with two instances of wartime propaganda written by American women in France in 1915. Both Edith Wharton's *Fighting France* and Mildred Aldrich's *A Hilltop on the Marne* offer a complex and often contradictory sense of a woman writer's struggles with authority, resistance, and killing. In the process, Gallagher teases out the role of specular vision and the impossibility of "directly" seeing the war.

Gallagher then turns to literary and visual texts produced by two female journalists between 1940 and 1945. Martha Gellhorn's 1940 novel *A Stricken Field* exhibits a range of gendered seeing positions within and in opposition to the visual ideologies of fascism during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Lee Miller's war correspondence and photography for *Vogue* show how Miller constructed herself and her predominantly female American audience as antifascist observers of war by working with and against some of the conventions of surrealist fashion photography.

Gallagher concludes by focusing on the experimental autobiographical prose of H.D. and Gertrude Stein to explore the functions of vision on two World War II "homefronts"—London during the Blitz and Vichy France.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Jean Gallagher’s book on the female subject, war, and the gaze will be one of the most important publications of this decade on women and war. Gallagher offers us compelling readings of texts and images from both wars. She has drawn together important recent theories of vision and visibility (Martin Jay, Norman Bryson, Paul Virilio, Jacqueline Rose) and connected them to a succession of works by women artists in order to explore the complex problems encountered by women who wish to represent war.”—**Margaret Higonnet**, coeditor of *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*

“Gallagher uses feminist critical theory to offer a subtle and nuanced approach to war literature and figuration. She examines the construction of the female seeing subject, discussing the process whereby women and what they see are represented as sites of political manipulation through the very act of seeing. . . . Gallagher nicely reveals the process whereby wartime subjectivity becomes gendered, foregrounding the essentially visual nature of war as it is portrayed in its theater. Not overly technical or jargon filled, this study is suitable and recommended for all levels—and it is a crucial addition for women’s studies and all general collections.”—*Choice*

“*The World Wars Through the Female Gaze* is most valuable as a complex and well articulated construction of the vision, the act of seeing war and making meaning, of women writers in the visual culture that belligerent nations create.”
—*Cithara*

“*The World Wars Through the Female Gaze* is an ambitious book with persuasive arguments that are bound to stimulate critical debate across the areas so successfully integrated: photography, literature, history, and women’s studies. It is also seductively presented to us in a design that attracts and pleases the eye.”
—*South Atlantic Review*

About the Author

Jean Gallagher is an assistant professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Polytechnic University in New York City.

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