



Photograph and memory: The function of the image of the soldier in 'Homecoming Prisoners, Vienna 1947'

The Homecoming Prisoners, Vienna 1947, was taken at Vienna's Southern Railway station in 1947. It was the day when the first Prisoners of War returned from Eastern Europe, about 600 in total. Ernst Haas happened to be there and photographed the POWs and the people welcoming them home. This photograph sums up the emotions of that moment; of searching and finding and hope and loss.

Even though almost half of the image is taken up by the returning POW, the tonality and use of depth of field draw the viewer immediately to a lady who is holding a photograph of a young soldier, presumably her son. Behind her is a row of young men, of which the one in the back, right in the upper centre of the image, is a striking resemblance of the soldier in the picture. The woman with the photograph, the boy in the back and the POW form a triangle that makes the eye wonder from the woman's desperate look and her proud son in the photograph to the bitter expression of the man in the back to the relieved, but also tense smile of the returning POW.

The upper third of the image is taken by the wall. Vienna was heavily bombed during World War II. It looks like this wall was damaged as well and patched up again at different places. Both the wall and the people in front signify the complicated past, present and future of post-war Austria.

Lalage Snow took photographs of soldiers before, during and after serving in Afghanistan. There is a striking difference in their gaze in the different stages, reflecting the trauma experiences they might have gone through. 'The Homecoming Prisoner of War' brings together these pre- and post- conflict gazes and its responses, triggering haunting

Comment [KWR1]: I would recommend formally referencing the image Also, make this title larger and at the top – centrally justified, with your name, student number, module title, assignment title etc.

Comment [KWR2]: Excellent observation

Comment [KWR3]: Making a narrative assumption here ... you have already highlighted the fact that we don't know who this person is ... we can only assume it is her son.

Comment [KWR4]: Would it be worth including an image here to illustrate your point ?

questions with its viewers. Have the soldiers endured much suffering? Have they committed war crimes? Where were they imprisoned, were they wounded? Do they feel shame, pride, remorse? Have they been faithful to their family at home? How do they deal with having lost the war, the shame and guilt as history unravels?

In his article *The Memory of Photography* Bates describes Barthes' punctum as the element in the image that triggers what Proust called 'the involuntary memory'. 'If we follow an associative path for the image to our memory it can lead to other memories, even a suppressed memory and, with critical work, an essential repressed memory' (Bates, 2013:254). The photograph of the soldier serves as a punctum for the viewers as well as for the people in the image itself. It is a stark reminder of the lost or dead in a scene of survivors and emphasises the extreme emotions that were felt during that day.

The question arises why the lady had chosen to bring this particular image of her son. The image is clean and looks like it has just been taken out of a frame or family album. Did she think that the POWs would recognise her son better in a uniform or is this the only image she had? 'The photograph as an 'artificial memory device ' intersects with a 'natural memory' in complex ways' (Bates, 2013:255). If so, how has this image formed the woman's memory of her son and will it be realistic enough to recognise her son at all if he does return? The image seems out of place in the scene. The neat, impressive uniform is in strong contrast with the shabby clothes that the POW and men in the back are wearing. The pride and zest on the young soldier's face has turned bitter and fragile in the expressions of the people in present.

Strong as the photograph might stand out in the image, the punctum is completely overlooked by its possible viewers in the scene itself. An obvious reason would be that they were too focused on finding their own loved ones in the crowds. However, 'If images are part of 'an archive that establishes the truth of 'social remembrance, the 'remembrance of events worthy of presentation', a unifying factor, as monuments of and to the past' (Bates, 2013: 248), the ignoring of this particular photograph might exemplify a bigger response of post-war Austria to their traumatic and shameful past.

The boys in the back's body language is defensive, even cynical. Is it because his welcome home wasn't as warm as the POW's seems to be? Has he faced rejection or denial of his experiences? Has he lost loved ones while he was gone? Does this boy stand for Austria's future, in defence and cold towards what has happened?

After having scrolled from one person to the other, the eye comes to a halt at the questioning face of the lady with the photograph, the lightest and sharpest area in the photograph. Ernst Haas chooses to focus the viewers' eye on the past, showing by means of a photograph that it cannot be overlooked or hushed away. By doing so Haas emphasises the meaning of photography itself, not just to its viewers, but especially for himself. The Homecoming Prisoners, Vienna 1947 marks the beginning of his career as a photographer and the creation of an iconic body of art.

Shortly after photographing this image, Ernst Haas left Austria. Unable to deal with its post-war society he did not return again. Having had Jewish ancestors it must have been very hard to see his country being built up and people continuing their lives, while so many of his friends and family were dead. The Homecoming Prisoners, Vienna 1947 might most of all be a personal recognition of the loss and desperation the woman was feeling and a protest against how this was completely being ignored.

Comment [KWR5]: David Bate

Comment [KWR6]: Bate

Comment [KWR7]: Barthes description of Studium and Punctum highlights the fact that it is different for every viewer What is punctum in an image for you Might not be for me etc

Comment [KWR8]: Places emphasis upon

Comment [KWR9]: Again, you are confirming an assumption here ... agreed it is fairly obviously her son But without the facts we can't be sure. There may actually be another narrative to this story that only Haas knows.

Comment [KWR10]: Bate

Comment [KWR11]: Bate

Comment [KWR12]: The body language and pose of the soldier in the background

Comment [KWR13]: I would re-word your meaning here

Comment [KWR14]: I'm not really too sure what you mean here ... can you unpack this sentence a little further maybe ?

Comment [KWR15]: One other point about the image that wasn't mentioned much was the smile on the face of the POW in the foreground. It seems to me like a smile of recognition ... almost like he had found his relations (whom could be just out of frame to the left of the image). In addition to this, the triangular composition exists between the woman / the backgrounded soldier and the foregrounded POW. All three look in different directions though ... the woman at the POW, The POW at the person out of frame and the soldier cuts through both, looking directly at Haas.

References:

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- Koepnick, L.P.(I.P. (2004) 'Photographs and memories', *South Central Review*, 21(1), pp. 94–129. doi: 10.1353/scr.2004.0009
- Legendary (2014) *Homecoming soldiers by Ernst Haas, Vienna 1947*. Available at: <http://legendary.photos/homecoming-soldiers-ernst-haas-vienna-1947> (Accessed: 21 April 2016).
- Tau, 08 M. (2015) *The allied forces in Vienna – history of Vienna*. Available at: <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/history/overview/reconstruction.html> (Accessed: 22 April 2016).
- Taylor, D. and Dubuis, A. (2015) *The incredible changes to soldiers' faces before during and after Afghanistan*. Available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/haunting-photos-soldiers-faces-taken-6512225> (Accessed: 21 April 2016)

Reflection on the Assignment

This assignment asks for different criteria than the ones in which we are asked to produce a body of work. So I am using the information in the article recommended in the reader as a reference of criteria, albeit in a shortened version:

- 1 Research: I have read several articles about the photograph and memory that my tutor recommended. I wrote down all the passages that made me think of the photograph, which helped me form an idea of the role that memory plays in the image and especially in the photograph that the woman is holding. I was not able to include all my ideas and conclusions in the essay itself, being restricted to 1000 words and ended up using only one of the articles in the essay. I am not sure if the depth of research is reflected in the essay, also because the articles mainly triggered questions about the photograph.
- 2 Structure and Academic writing: As a non-native speaker I sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed with the academic language that other students seem to be able to use without difficulty. I trust it will get better when reading more and I have also started making lists of words and expressions that I'd like to use in future essays. On the other hand, I find that the essay is easy to read and understand and maybe that is preferable over texts that need to be read a few times before they are understood.
- 3 Presentation and format: I haven't used the official format that is normally used for writing essays, assuming that it is not necessary in this assignment. If so, I'll do that when sending in the assignment for assessment.
- 4 Feedback from other students: I posted my essay on the Facebook page and got the following feedback:

Lynda Kuit: It reads well Leonie. I would suggest a hyperlink to the set images that you are referring to when speaking about Lalage Snow (just so its there for comparative purposes) and I'd also try and work in the words sign & signifier/signified. Its a such a moving image!

Comment [KWR16]: There seems to be enough referencing ... but mostly Bate. It's difficult when restricted to only 1000 words really !

Comment [KWR17]: It will get easier ... this was a good attempt. Keeping a glossary of terms will certainly help in relation to the terminology used within the visual arts and specifically photographic practice.

Comment [KWR18]: Good idea ... I also point this out above.

Leonie Broekstra-Pauw: Thanks Lynda! I'll add the link. Now that I'm reading it again I also find some parts a bit repetitious, some more writing to do!

I have added some of the terms that were in the reader in my essay, but not too many because I guess that you should 'show and not tell'. In the way I explain the meaning of the elements in the images I suppose I am pointing to the elements without using the semiotic terms.

Holly Woodward: It's an excellent essay, Leonie. Well done. I enjoyed reading it.

Leonie Broekstra-Pauw: Thanks Holly! I find it hard to get a balance in academic writing and just expressing my thoughts, but with the earlier comments at other related posts it helps to get an idea of what to do.