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Alexander Nemerov. *Wartime Kiss: Visions of the Moment in the 1940s.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 175 pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-14578-5.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Wartime Kiss, by Alexander Nemerov, is billed as "a personal meditation on the haunting power of American photographs and films from WWII and later 1940s" (dustcover). The work begins by asking: "How do we remember the Second World War now?" (p. 1). Nemerov's personal essays are similar to the movie *Being John Malkovich* (1999); the reader is brought into the mind of Nemerov as he daydreams and ruminates on forty-six photos, along with several films, plays, and poems from the 1940s. Since *Wartime Kiss* is "a personal meditation," it is difficult to offer an objective review either agreeing or disagreeing with the author's findings.

There are only two criticisms that can be legitimately made of the book. First, the images that Nemerov analyzes are not a representative sample of life in the 1940s. His selection of photographs distorts the proper perspective of the time period. Second, his interpretations of the images are at times misguided. He offers interesting background history of many of the actors and photographers behind these works, but as a documentary of life in the war years I believe that he misses the mark. Admittedly the author is striving only to provide a personal perspective. Even in missing the mark, *Wartime Kiss* brings the reader on an interesting journey. Rather than beginning with a historical event and illustrating it with a carefully chosen photograph, his process begins with the individual arresting image and only then links it to history. In doing so, the author provides an enlightening process by which to explore and appreciate history.

Nemerov's goal is to understand the 1940s in a personal way. Sometimes he explores the history of the artist, such as the famous *Life* photographer Margaret Bourke-White. At other times, he examines actors, such as Olivia de Havilland or James Stewart. At times, his mind drifts with a flight of ideas that is difficult to follow. However, the connections that he makes are sometimes fascinating to contemplate. I frequently found myself asking why the author chose to link one photograph with another apparently unrelated image from a completely different source. This is where the magic of his method is revealed. For instance, Nemerov finds surprising symbolic connections between a personal snapshot of de Havilland and Stewart on a picnic with scenes from her movie *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). Nemerov offers a peek into rather than a comprehensive analysis of the history of the war.

The strength of *Wartime Kiss* is in allowing us a glimpse into the mind of an art historian. He describes photojournalism as creating "set-pieces wherein all that was held precious, special, could be locked and shown to future generations as a truth of the times" (p. 1). The photographs that he examines are sometimes obscure; he chose them "because they feel to me like a disturbance on the surface of things … a piercing, wounding sensation without explanation," "yet in their ephemeral and random combination, brought together like a bouquet in my hand, they promise a recollection that is more sensuous, maybe more delightful and more mysterious than an official history" (p. 2). He displays a series of forty-six photographs over five chapters loosely organized around discrete subjects but connected by overarching themes of time, flight, and altitude. I would have preferred a tighter organizational structure adhering to more coherent themes, such as depictions of the act of the kiss itself (as they come in many different flavors). I would have also preferred a more linear structure beginning with 1940 or the late 1930s and progressing to the end of the war and its aftermath.

Wartime Kiss begins with an extrapolation from the famous Alfred Eisenstaedt photo of the exuberant VJ Day kiss of the sailor and nurse to the wider mayhem of VJ Day celebration in New York to the cataclysmic violence unleashed from the war-ending atomic bomb. From there, Nemerov drifts to a private picture of Stewart and

de Havilland enjoying a picnic in 1940. Stewart and de Havilland recline in slumber on a blanket in the summer grass with a record player playing in the background. He describes the scene well: "Stewart and de Havilland seem poised and aslant the slowly turning globe itself, sloping their backs to the ball, as though they could feel the movement of it in their bodies, turning to the drowsiness of one eternal moment on earth" (p. 37). He provides some noteworthy background on the actors, their relationship with the photographer, and their connections to aviation.

Throughout the work, Nemerov returns to themes of time, flight, and altitude. Photography of course freezes time allowing us a window to the past. Images of the past are static, but our minds wander and ruminate over their meaning and context. Flight is both a reference to the emotional experience of the individual spirit ascending or descending and the technological explosion of the era, particularly in the field of aviation. Flight brings the mind to a new altitude from which to observe life. Altitude refers to perspective or the angle from which a photographer takes a picture. In particular, it implies a level of Godlike omniscience. In photography, the same scene viewed from a different perspective may convey an entirely different meaning. A view from street level is somewhat restrictive as the photographer is thrown into the midst of the action itself. A view from above allows the photographer (or historian) a level of objective detachment from the events. It is a clinical angle from which to make precise measurements and discerning judgments.

Nemerov takes us to this height in his discussion of Bourke-White. He brings us along on a B17 mission that she photographed over Tunis in 1943 as the first woman given government permission to go on a combat mission. Nemerov alludes to time and altitude as he analyzes the connections of a photo of circular bomb craters on an Italian airfield taken on the air raid with a 1929 photograph taken by Bourke-White depicting the circular arrangement of watch hands in production at the Elgin National Watch Company. The perfect symmetry of the bomb craters becomes a symbol of industrial beauty that was also illustrated in the watch factory prior to the war. However, in recognizing the aesthetic beauty of the devastation, Nemerov also ignores the grim reality of war. War is at its heart all about the ugliness of death, destruction, loss, and recovery. In fact, in the entire book there are only two photographs that hint at actual combat. Perhaps my argument is more with Bourke-White in finding aesthetic beauty in this most destructive human endeavor. I find Bourke-White's focus on the beauty of the scene as a sort of obscenity. Of course this is the dilemma for the artist. Beauty surrounds us even in death and destruction. What are the moral implications of finding this hidden beauty and displaying it for the world as an object of art? Dorothea Lange's beautiful portrait "Migrant Mother" (1936) (not featured or discussed in this book) from the Dust Bowl also illustrates this dilemma for the artist. Lange's work however compels the viewer to feel compassion for the migrant mother whereas Bourke-White's view of the bomb craters leaves the viewer in an emotionless appreciation of an aesthetic pattern. Should we look for beauty in suffering, death, and destruction? The real beauty is in the endurance of such monumental suffering, is it not? It is the same question for writers who romanticize courage and heroism of combat without mentioning the overwhelming loss inherent in war. Here I think Nemerov's greatest weakness is this lack of balance. Missing are the images of pain, suffering, and death. Is it not an affront of some sort to ignore these aspects of the war and its aftermath? Bourke-White also witnessed the liberation of the Buchenwald death camp in April 1945 with General George Patton's army. I would have loved to see a comparison of her photos with those of Lange's work on Japanese Americans in internment camps in the United States or on migrant workers in the Dust Bowl. The faces in both the Dust Bowl and concentration camp images carry similar blank expressions of deep unimaginable suffering. They cry out to the viewer for compassion. In my view, here is where we find the heart of war and of poverty: man's inhumanity toward man. At ground level, photographers cannot escape the reality of human suffering. They make eye contact with the ragged and shell-shocked survivors. We will not find Robert Capa floundering with the troops in the water off Omaha beach in this book. This is a neglected element in *Wartime Kiss*.

Nemerov does touch on human suffering when he takes on the 1949 movie *Twelve O'clock High* in his most engaging chapter entitled "Sentimental Mysticism." The movie explores the psychologically traumatic effects of combat as experienced by B17 crews. Nemerov makes several insightful observations about the opening scenes depicting English hatters measuring the head of an American B17 pilot after the war. Symbolically the hatters are in effect crowning America as the "new monarch of the post-1945 world" (p. 106). If I were to use this book as a teaching tool I might begin with a screening of *Twelve O'clock High* followed by a discussion of this chapter. In describing a later scene of the movie, Nemerov inadvertently points to his own methodology of exploring history in writing *Wartime Kiss*. "The Amer-

ican is not an archivist, but instead the kind of historian who preserves the past via a direct and devastating chance personal impression. Walking down the street, minding his own business, he happens to see an object that to others ... is a meaningless piece of ephemera" (p. 100). This process unfortunately allows Nemerov too much latitude to drift far away from the central messages of the war. (I would love to have Nemerov's impressions of the 1946 movie *The Best Years of Lives.* The movie deals with veterans returning from war struggling to adapt to a changed society, damaged bodies, and tormented minds.)

Nemerov recognizes a symbolic connection between art and actual history when he discusses the history of a kiss between Charles Boyer and de Havilland, portrayed in the 1941 movie *Hold Back the Dawn.* He neatly ties the romance in the movie to the seduction of the innocent and virginal United States by Europe into the war. He also neatly weaves in a discussion of the story of the actual filming of the kiss which happened over three days. He points out that the first three small town reviews of it appeared on December 6, 1941, one day before the United States entered into World War II. The background history of the film and the film's symbolism reflecting the impending conflict of the time are nicely stitched together. I am surprised, however, that Nemerov did not open the book with this chapter, as it directly deals with the start of the war and America's reticence to get involved, and end with the VJ Day photo. Instead, he begins with the end of the war and drifts his way to the beginning, free of the constraints of time.

Wartime Kiss offers an interesting way to explore history. Rather than viewing history through the rearview mirror (where objects may be closer than they appear), Nemerov views it through a fun house mirror (where objects are so distorted that they are not what they appear to be at all). He makes connections where they may not be readily apparent, such as when he compares a photograph of Belita Jepson-Turner in a bikini diving in a pool (which graced the cover of the August 27, 1945, issue of *Life*) to an image of the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima and to the nurse featured in the VJ Day photograph of the sailor and nurse in Eisenstaedt's most famous photo. This nontraditional method disconnects the photos with the brutality of war. In his desire to find symbolic connections, which are sometimes thrilling, I believe Nemerov at times loses track of the reality of the moment. What he neglects to some extent is the unprecedented level of human suffering that was World War II. Readers looking for a reality based review of the war and its personal impact on the individual would do better to consider the companion piece to Ken Burns's documentary on World War II, *The War: An Intimate History 1941-1945* (2010) by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns. In the end, it must be remembered that this personal reflection on the 1940s is not meant to be a definitive history of the war. In this regard, *Wartime Kiss* is a fascinating introduction to the underlying symbolism, planned and unplanned, of the war. It encourages the reader to look with fresh eyes at old movies and photo stills hidden in private albums or stuffed away in drawers.

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