

Social Meanings and Images of Photojournalism in the Biographical Drama Lee

Jana Radošínská ¹, Ján Višňovský ^{2*}

¹ Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia

² Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia. Email: jan.visnovsky@ucm.sk

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 20 Dec 2024	Photojournalism is an extremely demanding and complex professional specialization in the field of media production, which is associated with certain prejudices and contradictory evaluations. Regarding war photography, we often critically discuss whether it is more important to create authentic, albeit shocking testimonies visualizing the cruelty and meaninglessness of war, or whether we should prioritize the deeply personal, even intimate feelings of the people being portrayed while suffering and dying. The views of the general public on photojournalism are also largely influenced by the ways in which media producers create emotionally engaging, yet sometimes hyperbolized and/or distorted images of photo journalists and their work in feature films or television dramas. The main goal of the study is to critically reflect on the way in which the creators of the feature-length biographical drama Lee (2023) tell the story of American photographer Elizabeth “Lee” Miller, a former fashion model who became an acclaimed war correspondent for the Vogue magazine during World War II. Applying the principles of discourse analysis, the authors focus on social meanings present in the given film, specifically on the depiction of different aspects of Lee Miller’s work and its cultural significance. Keywords: Biographical Drama, Photojournalism, Social Meanings In Film, Visual Journalism, War Photography.
Revised: 19 Feb 2025	
Accepted: 26 Feb 2025	

INTRODUCTION

Photojournalism (sometimes also called visual journalism) is an important, yet somewhat overlooked part of journalistic production. It is quite surprising, especially if we consider that media audiences not only welcome, but rather seek and demand visually spectacular information. Harcup claims that photojournalism, as a practice, is strongly tied to long-form content that often involves a personal perspective of its author(s). Texts and photographs are combined into news stories, features or reports, most typically by individuals who both write texts and provide visual materials [1].

Cookman explains that the history of American photojournalism recognizes three traditions of practice, namely “bearing witness to history, promoting social reform, and embracing humanism” [2, p. 3]. The fourth tradition, however, refers to the evolution of photographic technology. The desire to capture important moments and portray exceptional people manifested itself early after the invention of photography, from the first war photographs taken during the Mexican-American War to portraits of Abraham Lincoln and other crucial political figures produced by Mathew Brady and his contemporaries. Twentieth-century photojournalism was shaped by a number of prominent photojournalists, especially war correspondents (such as Robert Capa with his images of D-day, Margaret Bourke-White and her portrait of Gandhi, or W. Eugene Smith’s photo essays documenting frontline events during the battle of Iwo Jima and Okinawa) [2]. The given facts allow us to claim that photojournalism has been an important part of public information dissemination since the advent of mass media.

Nevertheless, Wilson argues that the familiar cultural figure of the photojournalist emerged relatively late in the history of photography, taking a shape only in the 1930s and then developing quickly under the unique conditions provided by the conjunction of the new, picture-driven mass print media and their coverage of the global conflict of

World War II [3]. In other words, we may note that photojournalism significantly strengthened its prominence thanks to its ability to convey authentic testimonies uncovering the true nature of the global armed conflict, utilizing a range of technological advancements and innovations along the way.

Our previously published work on film production depicting various aspects and sides of journalistic work suggests there is a wide spectrum of related portrayals in today's audiovisual culture. Frequent incorporation of the images of journalistic profession into feature films indicates that the general interest in such topics and stories is related to both mainstream media audiences and viewers who favor less conventional storytelling [4]. Since many similar audiovisual narratives situate journalists in the position of heroic figures representing good or justice, it is quite logical that they cannot avoid the use of hyperbole, excessive emphasis on specific actions, reactions or decisions, and the inevitable revelation of problematic or controversial aspects of the journalistic profession. This is why it is necessary to define the outlines of photojournalism as an important part of media production; doing so allows us to find out which aspects of photojournalism are included in the analyzed film, and whether this depiction respects the principles of photojournalism or not.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Key Principles of Photojournalism

According to Good and Lowe, photojournalism, as a genre of photography, cannot and does not exist in isolation. Its roots and influences originate from other kinds of imagery, referring to a variety of visual arts with diverse aesthetic aspirations. The term photojournalism was arguably coined by Frank Luther Mott in 1924. Mott also majorly influenced early photojournalism education; thanks to introducing the first specialized photojournalism class offered by the University of Iowa. The photojournalist, as the authors argue, produces photographic imagery intended for a public audience which is to be published by either magazines, or online news outlets, or nongovernmental organizations. Prime examples of the most renowned photojournalistic work are typically included in extended photo series or essays. These are usually not suitable for daily newspapers, as dailies tend to favor single images accompanying specific news items over publishing more complex visual narratives consisting of multiple contextually associated images [5]. This also means that creating a meaningful series of photographs may take a long time (depending on what type of event or person the content wants to focus on).

Promoting ethical standards in visual journalism, The National Press Photographers Association defines specific strategies and norms which aim to strengthen public confidence in the profession, especially in the communication era defined by artificial intelligence, general distrust in media content and political instability. The Code of Ethics, for example, urges photojournalists to create accurate, comprehensive representations of reality and quickly reveal staged situations posing as unique photo opportunities. Professionals are also expected to avoid stereotyping and presenting their own biases. All subjects, especially victims of crime or tragedy should be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. The photographed events should not be intentionally manipulated, influenced, or altered to produce a more engaging or interesting portrayal. Photojournalists are also required to preserve the integrity of the captured images and their content and context, without misleading viewers, misrepresenting subjects, paying their sources or otherwise rewarding them materially. The Code also declares that photojournalists should never intentionally sabotage other journalists' work and express any harassing behavior towards their colleagues or subjects. It is recommended to actively seek alternatives to shallow or rushed opportunities, provide a diversity of viewpoints, and include unpopular or otherwise unnoticed points of view. Any political, civic, and/or business involvement potentially compromising the photojournalist's independence and impartiality is highly undesirable [6]. Considering these ethical standards, it is quite difficult to comply with them even when we are talking about experienced professionals, not to mention citizen journalists, activists, or film writers and producers aiming to create convincing depictions of real or fictional characters that represent journalism as a profession.

Photojournalism Then and Now

As noted by Allan, recently, it has become usual and easily predictable that the person first to visually capture a newsworthy event is an ordinary citizen, as "the spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment contributions of citizens who happen to be present have become so commonplace as to be almost expected (indeed, explanations for the absence

of such material would likely be noted in subsequent news reports).” [7, p. 458] However, the rapid speed at which this content is produced does not say much about its quality. Mortensen and Gade argue that professional images encompass significantly more elements of photojournalism than their nonprofessional counterparts, merging and conveying emotion, action, conflict, and graphic appeal. Thus, the authors see a significant difference between quality of photojournalism provided by specialized photojournalistic staff and the content obtained in another way, published after layoffs of these professionals [8].

Another aspect worth mentioning is that photojournalism is further threatened by the general assumption that any visual material can easily be manipulated and rearranged to depict a biased depiction of reality. However, Santos Silva and Eldridge II argue that the suspicion that there might be a significant difference between what is displayed, i.e., captured through lens and what actually happened has been a part of the public discourse on photojournalism since the first generation of war photographers such as Mathew Brady and Roger Fenton [9]. According to Kramara Jonisová and Svítok Mayerová, it is necessary to acknowledge that photographs always serve as evidence in the future so that people will remember remarkable events and moments – what is even more important, they will remember them as they are captured in the photographs, not as they actually happened. This is why such visuals have to capture reality as accurately as possible. In the context of journalistic photography, we can mention a well-known example of a series of photographs taken by Brian Walski, who photographed a group of Iranian refugees. However, he did not like either of the images, so he combined two different photographs to create the one he eventually sent to the Los Angeles Times. This case is regarded as one of the first known computer-generated manipulations of war photographs. However, the image’s inauthenticity was discovered shortly thereafter, and Walski lost his job [10].

Alper considers the contemporary use of photo filters (especially typical for Instagram) to be one of the biggest problems associated with photojournalism. Becoming widely available, this practice has stirred various controversies amongst both journalists and cultural critics. These critical voices claim that such platforms, digital apps and automated tools available to basically anyone actively contribute to the de-professionalization of photojournalism, and that they often depict war as stylishly vintage [11]. Such debates, the author suggests, are closely associated with the enduring questions about “distinctions between photography and illustration, photography and photojournalism, professional and amateur, and reporting and editorializing.” [11, p. 1233]

Trying to rationalize the allocation of available resources, editorial offices of magazines are often not interested in long-term reporting projects. Obtaining images from either large commercial stock photo providers such as Getty Images or press agencies, editors no longer tend to employ in-house photographers. In contrast, video production is on the rise, and its future seems to be much brighter than in case of photojournalism. Moreover, in Slovakia, it is typical that writing journalists are multiskilled, expected to take and edit photographs, as well as to produce and edit videos, transforming them into short clips and reels preferred in the social media environment. Klein-Avraham and Reich argue that digitalization influences much more than “the speed and efficiency in which news photos are taken, transmitted, selected, manipulated, stored, and retrieved.” [12, p. 429] As we struggle to address the ongoing crisis in the employment of professionals specializing in photojournalism, digitalization might help us to define which competences and skills associated with emerging technologies need to be developed to partly restore the renown of professional photographers [12].

Today, the prevailing forms of photojournalism often focus on local armed conflicts, civil wars and problems associated with illegal migration. Chouliaraki and Stolić provide a visual analysis of front-page news images to demonstrate that photojournalism depicting migration usually refers to two different types of political encounters with arriving migrants. First, migrants are shown while they are being confronted with procedures and actions of border patrols and related bureaucracy. Second, some photographs portray migrants’ everyday struggles, i.e., their existential encounters which might appeal to people’s emotional and activist sensibilities [13]. The article by Chouliaraki [14] mentions that “there is a historical shift towards an increasingly explicit visualization of war” [14, p. 315]; today, the emotional impact of the battlefield events upon both soldiers and civilians tends to be emphasized, preferred over physical suffering and explicit images of wounded bodies [14].

Images of Journalists in Mainstream Cinema

The current depictions of journalists in audiovisual media culture are usually based on the key binary opposition of heroism and anti-heroism. As Good points out, heroic characters are often engaged in either war journalism or investigative journalism, while anti-heroic protagonists tend to seek scandals and sensations for selfish reasons, being presented as, for example, paparazzi or greedy tabloid photographers. They often betray the public's trust because they prioritize their personal, economic or political interests [15]. However, a variety of specializations can be encountered while watching feature films. Referring to Saltzman's categorization of images of journalists in popular culture, we define three specializations which are essential in relation to the analyzed film. First, we have to mention editors – characters communicating experience, authority and responsibility related to journalistic profession. They select journalistic content produced by subordinates and decide whether to publish it or not, often acting as mentors or protectors of aspiring or developing professionals. Second, photojournalists – they often travel, typically over long distances, in an effort to obtain unique shots and capture original moments. Depicted as courageous, these characters usually experience emotional crises after witnessing and capturing cruelty and horrific acts. When possessing the anti-heroic framing, they willingly sacrifice anything and anyone to obtain photos or videos no one else can. Third, war correspondents can be defined as specialized photojournalists interested in armed conflicts and their consequences. These usually heroic characters do not know (or at least do not show) the fear of dangerous situations. They typically travel abroad, especially into war zones. Similar stories include discourses tied to patriotism, willingness to face danger, images of extreme violence, and dramatic situations [16].

Acknowledging this, we base our analysis on the assumption that the views of the general public on photojournalism are shaped by the ways in which media producers present artificially created images of photojournalists in feature films or television dramas – even though most of these stories are actually based on real events. Dramatized audiovisual storytelling can hardly take into account the whole scale of routines associated with journalistic work or all the important aspects connected with visual journalism. Thus, the media audiences subsequently interpret the principles of photojournalism and its essential frameworks not in relation to the real conditions and circumstances of journalistic production, but primarily through distorted, romanticized representations of (photo)journalists and their personal lives and everyday struggles [4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study aims to identify the social meanings present in the biographical war drama *Lee*, released in 2023. We presume that these meanings allow the analyzed film story to explore the conflicts stemming from Lee Miller's private life and career during World War II manifesting themselves in her family affairs in the 1970s, when she is portrayed as an elderly woman who does not like to talk about her past. The previous theoretical overview on the problem of understanding photojournalism and seeing it in the context of contemporary film production is followed by discourse analysis of the feature film in question.

We have decided to focus on this particular film in order to discuss how its creators communicate a set of complex binary oppositions involving a less publicly known female photojournalist. These binary oppositions, as we presume, involve Lee Miller's personal life (mostly defined by interactions with her long-time lover and partner Roland Penrose) and her work, presented as a true calling and mission. As we believe, these aspects allow the character of Lee Miller to personify a range of competences, skills and principles associated with photojournalism. We are interested in finding out which principles of photojournalism she complies with, and which of her actions are rather questionable, and why. Being an independent British film, the biographical drama *Lee* cannot compete with much more commercially ambitious and expensive film projects; yet, its purpose lies elsewhere. The film targets mature audiences interested in both journalistic profession and extraordinary events or people who were publicly active during World War II.

Our aim is to explore the ways in which this narrative inspired by true events represents photojournalism and which aspects of this journalistic specialization are prioritized to emphasize its purpose and society-wide significance. The drama also reflects a broader spectrum of social meanings related to content structures of independent non-American cinema focusing on topics often overlooked by mainstream film audiences. The process of identifying the individual social meanings utilizes the principles of discourse analysis defined by Rose [17]. Our understanding of the concept of "social meaning" is inspired by Turner's influential discussion on films acting as important socio-cultural agents

[18]. Claiming that social meanings encourage film audiences to identify with narratives and/or characters present within them, Plencner explains that social meanings are either embedded in a film's discourse (associated with storytelling), or they become prominent when film audiences express their willingness to emotionally identify with the portrayed characters [19].

RESULTS: CINEMATIC PORTRAYAL OF LEE MILLER – FROM A FASHION MODEL TO A WAR CORRESPONDENT

The analyzed film *Lee* is a biographical drama set during World War II in Europe. The genre identity of the story also determines its thematic outlines and essential idea. We can speak of a so-called one-off film with a coherent storytelling. The structure of the narrative does not provide much space for its possible continuation, whether through sequels or prequels. The main idea of the film refers to the fact that a person truly recognizes their true nature only in the most extreme situations, for example, when they voluntarily confront pure evil or the consequences of inhuman treatment. The ambition of social meanings in feature films is to communicate images referring to universal experiences of people or to the pitfalls of their everyday existence. In the case of the examined story, references to people's everyday existence dominate. On the other hand, the story also contains a combination of universal social meanings – a clear opposition between good and evil and a metaphor of self-realization.

The film's main character, Lee Miller (Kate Winslet), is an adult woman who has experienced what it is like to be part of the glamorous world of high fashion and lifestyle magazines. On the other hand, the film does not show her during her career as a fashion model who does not particularly enjoy being portrayed. The audiences briefly explore her prewar life and work as she tries to become a photographer specializing in stylized portraits and commercial photo sessions. However, it is already obvious that photojournalism is her true calling, which is also explicitly pointed out by her soon-to-be lover and partner, Roland Penrose (Alexander Skarsgard). The conversation in question occurs during the couple's first meeting, in the presence of a carefree group of avantgarde artists, journalists and socialites, e.g., the cubist painter Pablo Picasso (Enrique Arce), the surrealist poet Paul Éluard (Vincent Colombe), his wife Nusch (Noémie Merlant), the artist and photographer Emmanuel Radnitzky, better known as Man Ray (Seán Duggan), and Solange d'Ayen (Marion Cotillard), the editor of the French edition of *Vogue*, accompanied by her husband Jean (Patrick Mille).

This community of friends and associates vividly debates the rise of Nazism in Germany and beyond, finding it incomprehensible and absurd. Lee Miller later, during her time on the frontlines or near them, documents not only extreme manifestations of evil such as the immediate aftermath of horrific crimes against humanity committed within the Nazi concentration camps, but also everyday realities of people facing these horrors, such as soldiers, nurses, doctors, chauffeurs, and ordinary people as well. In the absence of good, Miller's photos are meant to serve as mementos of human suffering, courage and cruelty, but also as quiet, yet clear and visually explicit accusations of those who do not show even the most basic respect for humanity, dignity and moral integrity.

Not Lee Miller, but rather her photographs are depicted as something that should not be ignored and forgotten, such as the moment when she unknowingly captures the first ever combat deployment of napalm and the level of destruction it causes to people, animals and the environment. This universal social meaning is loosely merged with the main protagonist's need for recognition – not because she is a woman willing to risk her life while taking photographs but, more importantly, because she knows it is important to publish these images so that people all over the world can see the harsh truth about armed conflicts and those consumed by their atrocities.

Lee Miller's photographs shown during the film, carefully simulating their authentic counterparts preserved by her son and his family, represent unique variations of photojournalism expressed by war photography. However, in many cases it is questionable whether it is necessary to capture situations that few would want to see. Such an ethically challenging and ambivalent decision can be identified in the scene where Lee Miller takes a portrait of a seriously wounded soldier while he lies unconscious and undergoes an amputation of his leg. The same statement applies to

the scene in which Lee Miller, accompanied by her occasional associate, another war correspondent and fellow American Davy Scherman (Andy Samberg) who works for the Life magazine, insists on taking close-up shots of the remains of people who did not survive the transport to the extermination camps and are still lying inside freight trains, because these horrid pictures are to be important historical evidence for future generations. On the contrary, at another moment the main character engages in a casual conversation with a badly burned young man treated in a field hospital, admiring his expressive and “lively” eyes. Her portraits of this scarred soldier are created during a shared discussion that resembles a friendly small talk with elements of humor and self-irony. In this case, the wounded soldier gives her permission to take his photograph.

Throughout the film’s story, it is not suggested or otherwise claimed that Lee Miller manipulates her photographs in any way. Her professionalism can be seen when she attempts to take a photo of a battered and sexually abused teenage girl while she shares bread with other terrified women and children. The main character does not try to stop the girl or convince her to look into the camera. Instead, she waits patiently until the girl accepts her presence and decides that the woman with the camera does not pose a threat to her. There is also a moment when Lee Miller is unable to take photographs as she is supposed to, finding it impossible to remain impartial. This situation involves the main protagonist’s unexpected reunion with her friend Solange d’Ayen. Shocked by her unhealthy appearance and fragile state of mind, at first Lee does not even recognize her once elegant and charming friend. Now she sees her alone, trying to clean up her former apartment and find out anything regarding her missing husband’s whereabouts.

These universal social meanings intertwine with the protagonist’s everyday experiences tied to situational, representational, and motivational stimuli. Since situational social meanings are closely related to film characters’ family life, love and work, they also provide us with an opportunity to perceive them as “one of us,” as people who love and hate, experience pleasant feelings and disappointments, succeed and make mistakes. Lee Miller is first portrayed as an elderly woman who is having a conversation with a young man inside her house. This man (Josh O’Connor) initially appears to be a historian, journalist, or maybe writer interested in the protagonist’s life story and her memories of the World War II period. The dialogue resembles an interview, but Lee Miller surprisingly insists that if she is to talk about her past, the young man present in her home must tell her about his mother. The aforementioned moment suggests that this is only a simulated or pretended form of conversation.

Lee Miller then describes her past through an extensive flashback. However, the audience is left with no details about the identity or motivation of the man hearing about her career in photojournalism. Only towards the end of the story it is revealed that Lee Miller has passed away and there is no one else in the house – just the young man, revealed as her son Antony who has just found his mother’s photojournalistic work, hidden in the attic and almost forgotten. The whole “interview” is thus a grieving son’s symbolic attempt to better understand his deceased mother’s alcoholism, emotionally distant nature and mixed feelings towards the idea of raising children and having them in the first place. This clearly shows that Lee Miller’s wartime experience caused her anxiety, distress and general inability to trust people.

The film also focuses on Lee Miller’s intimate relationship with British art dealer and entrepreneur Roland Penrose, Antony’s presumed father. When forced to decide between staying with Roland and leaving to become a war correspondent (or going back to the frontline), Lee Miller always leaves to eventually return to her lover. Her work is a clear source of conflict, but not because Roland Penrose would like to sabotage her career. He repeatedly expresses his fear for her life, whilst the main protagonist implicitly criticizes the fact that Roland has decided to avoid active duty and join the Royal Engineers instead, using his artistic skills to apply camouflage upon important buildings and locations and protect them against aerial bombardment. The character of Lee Miller also embodies the representational social meaning of (wo)man against the system. “The system” (British armed forces) does not allow her to explore and photograph battlefields. At first, the main protagonist is limited to observing everyday lives of those who do not engage in active combat. In her case, “the system” also involves another complication, Cecil Beaton (Samuel Barnett), co-editor of British Vogue, who tends to automatically disagree with his colleague, Dame Audrey Withers (Andrea Riseborough), who believes in Lee Miller’s skills and often is the only one in the editorial office praising her work and fighting to publish it in Vogue. For instance, Beaton loudly protests against publishing Miller’s photograph depicting freshly washed women’s undergarments displayed in barracks occupied by nurses and female mechanics, which men are not allowed to enter.

Nevertheless, the main protagonist feels that Withers could do even more and that she does not try hard enough. This conflict escalates and concludes when Lee Miller finds out that her most important photographs were not published, as censors believed images like that would only further traumatize the already exhausted and suffering nation. Her reaction is rather extreme, as she loses her temper and deliberately destroys most of the unpublished photographs archived by Vogue, along with negatives. However, later it is revealed that Withers produced multiple copies of Lee's work and sent them to the United States, and that the material was eventually published in American Vogue instead. In a way, the main protagonist stubbornly faces "the system", i.e., society which refuses to accept the full scale of destruction, tragedy and humiliation caused by World War II. Lee Miller's personal motivation clearly shifts between her desire to break through (using her skills to capture reality and publicly share her work) and her desire to symbolically punish (reveal, unmask) those who murdered, tortured or assaulted other people – including allied soldiers who sexually abuse French girls and women, cynically claiming that they should be more "thankful" and "friendly."

Throughout the story, Lee Miller, a talented photographer is shown while struggling to produce truthful as well as emotionally engaging texts that are to be published along with her photographs. It is obvious that visual communication is her domain, and the written word might be her weakness, at least initially. However, she overcomes this obstacle thanks to her friend and colleague Davy Scherman and his patient guidance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The biographical drama *Lee*, a recently released film portrayal of war photographer Lee Miller who made her living as a fashion model before World War II, emphasizes that the significant importance of women in journalism is not tied only to several turning points in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The main character documents unimaginable cruelty with her camera, including scenes captured during the liberation of Nazi extermination camps. The audience has the opportunity to see the destruction of her personal life and the manifestations of posttraumatic stress disorder, which not only soldiers, but also all other people in various support or assistance roles suffer from [4].

The photojournalist's moving personal story, which is linked to the analyzed work and captures scenes of extreme violence during World War II, presents individualism as the preferred strategy for producing visual journalism. Despite Lee Miller's repeated collaboration with American war correspondent David Scherman affiliated with the Life magazine, she repeatedly claims working alone is better for her, as she does not have to face any power struggles often occurring in teams sharing a common mission. In contrast, an emotional portrait of a team of photojournalists is present in the feature-length drama *The Bang Bang Club*, released in 2010 and directed by Steven Silver. Lee Miller's cinematic story is not defined by any particular photograph becoming globally famous, iconic and shocking, unlike Kevin Carter's portrayal in *The Bang Bang Club* that largely focuses on fame and professional acclaim the photographer achieved after publishing his photograph widely known as *The Vulture and the Little Girl* documenting the 1993 famine in Sudan, and on personal struggles and public outrage he faced shortly afterwards. This case explains in detail the moral and ethical consequences related to questioning the legitimacy of taking and publishing a photo like that (the portrayed child is malnourished, exhausted and struggling to crawl, but still alive, while the vulture is watching, waiting in the background). Lee Miller also struggles with various manifestations of posttraumatic stress disorder, but not because of a particular image, but rather due to a variety of events and moments she has witnessed, from women being sexually assaulted by soldiers and publicly humiliated, through seeing her old friends broken, maltreated and defeated, to witnessing the horrors of death camps. She suppresses her emotional distress by drinking heavily, chain-smoking and taking unspecified medication which is supposed to "take the edge off," meaning to dull her senses.

Sontag mentions that photographs taken in April and May 1945 in Dachau and Buchenwald – like those captured by Lee Miller in the analyzed film, we might add – unveil the true superiority of photography in terms of defining, not only documenting the worst events and crimes against humanity ever recorded; even the most complex narratives and descriptions failed to match this kind of emotional and visual power [20]. Maybe this is why Lee Miller struggles to find the right words that would accompany her images of war and its consequences, striving to describe the unimaginable to those who were lucky to survive and do not even wish to look back.

Lee Miller's personality is also defined by binary oppositions established between herself and her partner – Roland Penrose. While Lee is stubborn, impulsive, a bit cynical and ambitious, she also finds it difficult to write texts which should describe her photographs to the reader and provide them with proper context. As noted above, she eventually develops multiple substance addictions, as drinking and smoking help her to cope with horrific moments she has witnessed and photographed during war. Roland, on the other hand, is patient, calm and effortlessly charming. He does not want Lee to go anywhere near the frontline, but he does wait for her to return nonetheless. Even though Roland Penrose was still alive when Lee Miller passed away in the 1970s, he is notably absent during her fictional “interview” with her son Antony depicted in the film. This might suggest that the couple's personal life after World War II was turbulent and conflicted. Nevertheless, they raised a son; in the film, the young man seemingly starts to truly understand his mother's personal struggles and volatile lifestyle after finding her photographs – most of them unpublished.

The cinematic portrayal of Lee Miller not only introduces an important female photojournalist to the general public; the movie also offers a remarkable portrayal of photojournalism in the period when it was crucial to capture visual testimonies that we can now use to better understand historical events and their consequences, especially because there are fewer and fewer eyewitnesses left. Even though today visual journalism is seemingly less important than back then, Newton argues that the mature form of photojournalism emerging in the twenty-first century can overcome both the naïve idealism typical for positivism in the 1920s and 1930s, reaching even beyond the late-twentieth-century postmodernism to become perhaps the only credible source of true, i.e., authentic, accurate and honest imagery we have left [21]. Especially at present, in the era of artificial intelligence and automated content generating which typically does not favor a sense of social responsibility.

It is important to emphasize that films such as *Lee* function as a necessary “counterbalance” against artificial intelligence tools used to create and edit photographs. According to Kramara Jonisová and Svítok Mayerová, artificial intelligence is changing the status of the image, overcoming the boundaries of indexicality, authorship and originality of the work. In the era of artificial intelligence, it is not even necessary to use a camera since a photograph can be created by online tools such as Midjourney, NightCafe Creator or DALL·E by OpenAI, Adobe Firefly or Stable Diffusion, which are easy to use. The user visualizes a scene in their head and describes it by words, while the algorithm provides them with several results – “photographs.” Thus, journalistic photography is undergoing a severe test in relation to automated content creation. In a way, visual journalism is losing its indexical nature, which has always allowed it to function as an imprint of reality, as a depiction of something that really existed. If photographs are generated based on commands, so-called prompts, we cannot talk about photography, but rather about promptography [10].

However, we cannot forget that today's technology also allows us to create faithful and accurate simulations of authentic photographs taken decades ago. These can be used in feature films such as *Lee*. This kind of simulation is necessary to re-create iconic photographs like the one taken by Davy Scherman, who famously photographed Lee Miller taking a bath at Munich apartment previously owned by Hitler. As a photojournalist, Lee Miller makes some ethically questionable, maybe even controversial decisions. The film also presents her as a woman who is hesitant to commit to a long-term relationship, and as a mother who is not particularly close to her adult son. These aspects make her notably anti-heroic. On the other hand, her character portrayed in the analyzed film allows the movie audiences to see the importance of photojournalism and risks associated with it, as Lee Miller struggles in her personal life while trying to convince editors that people need to see her photographs to understand the full scale of World War II and its consequences. Her sense of justice is dominant, as she insists that nameless victims need to be recognized and war crimes should be well documented and eventually punished.

Acknowledgements

The study is an outcome of the research project supported by Slovak Research and Development Agency (APVV) No. APVV-21-0115, titled ‘Hypermodern Media Culture – Film and Television Production as Mirror of Sociocultural Phenomena of the 21st Century’.

REFERENCES

- [1] Harcup, T., 2014, Oxford Dictionary of Journalism (London, U.K.: Oxford University Press).
- [2] Cookman, C., 2009, American Photojournalism: Motivations and Meanings (Evanston, IL, U.S.A.: Northwestern University Press).
- [3] Wilson, B. E., 2016, The corporate creation of the photojournalist: Life magazine and Margaret Bourke-White in World War II. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 9(2), 133-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2016.1190204>
- [4] Radošinská, J., 2024, Obraz profesionálneho novinára v životopisnej dráme Philomena. In: *Fenoméni 2024: Profesionalita a médiá*, edited by M. Belianská, J. Hacek, and M. Stanková (Bratislava, SVK: Comenius University), pp. 208-223.
- [5] Good, J., and Lowe, P., 2020, Understanding Photojournalism (London, U.K., and New York, NY, U.S.A.: Routledge).
- [6] The National Press Photographers Association, Code of Ethics, Date of access: 13/02/2025. <https://nppa.org/resources/code-ethics>
- [7] Allan, S., 2015, Introduction: Photojournalism and citizen journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 9(4), 455-483.
- [8] Mortensen, T. M., and Gade, P. J., 2018, Does photojournalism matter? News image content and presentation in the Middletown (NY) Times herald-record before and after layoffs of the photojournalism staff. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(4), 990-1010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018760771>
- [9] Santos Silva, M. F., and Eldridge II., S. A., 2020, The Ethics of Photojournalism in the Digital Age (Abingdon, U.K., and New York, NY, U.S.A.: Routledge).
- [10] Kramara Jonisová, E., and Svítok Mayerová, K., 2024, Od indexu k algoritmu: Transformácia žurnalistického obrazu prostredníctvom umelej inteligencie. In: *Fenoméni 2024: Profesionalita a médiá*, edited by M. Belianská, J. Hacek, and M. Stanková (Bratislava, SVK: Comenius University), pp. 135-156.
- [11] Alper, M., 2013, War on Instagram: Framing conflict photojournalism with mobile photography apps. *New Media & Society*, 16(8), 1233-1248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813504265>
- [12] Klein-Avraham, I., and Reich, Z., 2014, Out of the frame: A longitudinal perspective on digitization and professional photojournalism. *New Media & Society*, 18(3), 429-446. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814545289>
- [13] Chouliaraki, L., and Stolić, T., 2019, Photojournalism as political encounter: Western news photography in the 2015 migration 'crisis'. *Visual Communication*, 18(3), 311-331. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357219846381>
- [14] Chouliaraki, L., 2013, The humanity of war: Iconic photojournalism of the battlefield, 1914 – 2012. *Visual Communication*, 12(3), 315-340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357213484422>
- [15] Good, H., 1989, Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film (Metuchen, NJ, U.S.A.: Scarecrow Press).
- [16] Saltzman, J., Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular culture: A Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media, Date of access: 13/02/2025. <http://mail.ijpc.org/uploads/files/AEJMC%20Paper%20San%20Antonio%20Saltzman%202005.pdf>
- [17] Rose, G., 2012, Visual Methodologies: An introduction to Researching with Visual Materials (London, U.K., Thousand Oaks, CA, U.S.A., New Delhi, IND, and Singapore: Sage Publications).
- [18] Turner, G., 2006, Film as Social Practice (Abingdon, U.K., and New York, NY, U.S.A.: Routledge).
- [19] Plencner, A., 2008, Sociálne významy v mainstreamovom filme. In: *Médiá, spoločnosť, mediálna fikcia*, edited by S. Magál, M. Mistrik, and M. Solík (Trnava, SVK: University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius), pp. 85-94.
- [20] Sontag, S., 2004, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York, NY, U.S.A.: Picador).
- [21] Newton, J. H., 2012, The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality (Abingdon, U.K., and New York, NY, U.S.A.: Routledge).