

In the Light of that  
Dawn

*A Short Story*

Reflection Statement

## ***Reflection Statement***

Photojournalism became a popular mode of reporting in the Twentieth Century, particularly during World War II, and remains to this day highly regarded. But a photograph can only ever be fully understood within its context. My Major Work depicts the life of photojournalist Gerda Taro, from her childhood to her death. My purpose is to explore the turbulent political climate she lived in and the advancement of photojournalism, as they are inseparable from her life. Also of importance is her disappearance from popular memory and history after her death, and I wish to highlight the process through which she was forgotten. The fallibility and subjectivity of memory, photography and history are themes I explore in my work concerning Taro's life and legacy. My Major Work would be best placed in the journal *Glimmer Train*, as it focuses "discovering and publishing emerging writers"<sup>1</sup> and has numerous competition categories, including the Short Story Award for New Writers. The literary minded who purchase this journal appreciate experimental, innovative stories such as mine, which manipulates structure and form to immerse the reader in the story.

Inspiration for my work has been drawn from both the HSC Advanced and Preliminary Extension course. My Area of Study text, Ang Lee's film *Life of Pi*<sup>2</sup>, and my related text *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*<sup>3</sup> by Richard Flanagan both examine the subjectivity of truth, and how we choose to perceive stories or history. The insurance company's decision to accept Pi's story of survival with a Bengal Tiger as opposed to his darker story about human cruelty and the public's glorified perception of Dorrigo Evans' time on the Thai-Burma 'death' railway in contrast with his own derogatory perception, play into the notion that we choose to believe the 'better' story. I wanted my work to reflect this in regard to photography and how a photograph can be misinterpreted or given false history regardless of actual evidence.

The framing of my Major Work was heavily inspired by Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>4</sup>, studied in Preliminary Extension, as the novel framed Offred's story as historical truth using an academic prologue. I therefore frame my story as an historically accurate account despite a number of conversations and events being fictional. This further

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<sup>1</sup> *Glimmer Train Press Inc.* 2015, *Glimmer Train*, accessed 25 November 2014, <<http://www.glimmertrain.com/>>

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Pi* 2012, DVD, 20th Century Fox, Directed by Ang Lee.

<sup>3</sup> Flanagan, R 2013, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Vintage Books, Australia.

<sup>4</sup> Atwood, M 1986, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Houghton Mifflin Company, United States.

develops my theme of the subjectivity of history, and adds a historiographical element to my work.

While articles such as *Gerda Taro: The blonde of Brunete*<sup>5</sup> by Nisha Lilia Diu and *Robert Capa and Gerda Taro: Love in a time of war*<sup>6</sup> by Sean O'Hagan provided overall insight into Taro's life, a speech given by Irme Schaber, currently the foremost authority on Taro, was incredibly useful in its detail and specific information regarding Taro's family. Schaber stated "the whole family was murdered in the Holocaust in Yugoslavia... they were the first victims [of Nazi gas trucks]."<sup>7</sup> I wanted to make reference to their tragic deaths without explicitly mentioning the Holocaust - "...they are quickly lost in numbers, in sheer enormity. Four in six million..." were effective in achieving this; 6 million being an immediate connotation to the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.

My research on the Spanish Civil War, the key event in Taro's life, brought me to works such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*<sup>8</sup> and Pablo Neruda's poem *Arrival in Madrid of the International Brigade*. In particular, the phrases "gunpowder dream," "devouring monsters and... rages," and "in the fog of that dawn,"<sup>9</sup> struck me as being particularly poignant and relevant to my work. Thus, I decided to incorporate them in a number of ways. The first phrase was integrated into the line, "The city burns with the hope of gunpowder dreams," and the second in, "Instead I think of devouring monsters and rages." The third phrase, however, was particularly relevant to Taro's death at dawn, so I "In the Light of that Dawn," became my title. Light is a common motif in my work, particularly in regard to photography being reflections of light burnt onto film.

Fallis' assertion that "...Taro followed the New Vision school,"<sup>10</sup> led me to research László Moholy-Nagy, the founder of the New Vision, who held the "belief that art should... serve the

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<sup>5</sup> Lilia Diu, N 2007, 'Gerda Taro: The blonde of Brunete', *The Telegraph*, 9 December, accessed 14 December 2014, <<http://bit.ly/1UC2tfv>>

<sup>6</sup> O'Hagan, S 2012, 'Robert Capa and Gerda Taro: Love in a time of war', *The Observer*, 13 May, accessed 17 March 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1uAEeOI>>

<sup>7</sup> Schaber, I 2008, 'In the Picture with Irme Schaber: The Life and Work of Gerda Taro', *Viddler*, online video, accessed 10 May 2015, <<http://www.viddler.com/v/dac3c76>>

<sup>8</sup> Hemingway, E 1940, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Charles Scribner's Sons, United States.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, C 1997, 'The Aura of the Cause: Photographs from the Spanish Civil War', *The Antioch Review*, vol. 55, no. 3, accessed 20 March 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1Kk6IdA>>

<sup>10</sup> Fallis, G n.d., *Gerda Taro*, Utata, accessed 17 March 2015, <<http://www.utata.org/sundaysalon/gerda-taro/>>

construction of a new socialist world.”<sup>11</sup> Also important from a practical aspect to Taro’s photography was the Mexican Suitcase, a series of boxes containing hundreds of negatives by Taro, Capa and their friend Chim. The International Centre for Photography states that the film rolls “break down roughly into a third each by Chim, Capa, and Taro. Almost all of the film is from the Spanish Civil War...”<sup>12</sup> Notable, however, was the absence of a negative for Capa’s famous photograph ‘The Falling Soldier,’ and I wished to incorporate and explain this absence within my story, fitting with the notion that the photograph was taken by Taro and not Capa. I chose to have the negative, carried by Capa as a memento of Taro, to be destroyed when Capa steps on a mine and is killed, “... fading for home with a negative in his pocket of a falling man.”

In order to enhance these conceptual ideas, it was imperative that my independent research continue with an investigation into character voice, in which *How to Write Fiction (and Think About It)* was essential. Graham discussed omniscient narrators, stating how they can create a “means of pulling back, of giving the bigger picture, and to do it subtly, sparingly.”<sup>13</sup> I wanted to give the reader a macrocosmic portrait of the international climate during Taro’s time and a wider, historical overview of the Spanish Civil War. Therefore, I decided to employ the use of omniscient, third person narration to speak to the reader directly. In my Major Work, this translated into sections such as “all this so that she ends up here: Paris 1933,” and “The Spanish Civil War grinds to a halt in 1939.”

To further experiment with character voice and narrative structure, the use of second person was a valuable tool. In Melissa Tydell’s article *Why You Should Try Writing in Second Person* she examined the intimacy that second person can bring, giving the “readers a peek into a relationship, a memory, and a character’s emotions.”<sup>14</sup> I utilise this personal aspect in recounting Taro’s death as witnessed by Ted Allan, addressing the reader with lines such as “I do not know clearly what happened, and you will never truly know, because history is a fickle thing and stories are too.” This section was written in a type-writer font, suggesting a note written by Allan, perhaps at the time of Taro’s death, and making the moment more poignant.

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<sup>11</sup> Rezende, M 2012, *Original Creators: The New Vision of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy*, The Creators Project, accessed 19 May 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1TnWofO>>

<sup>12</sup> Young, C 2008, *The Story of the "Mexican Suitcase"*, International Centre of Photography, accessed 10 May 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1zTYvc2>>

<sup>13</sup> Graham, R 2007, *How to Write Fiction (And Think About It)*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

<sup>14</sup> Tydell, M 2013, *Why You Should Try Writing in Second Person*, The Write Practice, accessed 10 May 2015, <<http://thewritepractice.com/second-person/>>

As my work is largely one of historical fiction, Crook's point that "the authenticity of historical fiction depends on your knowledge and use of historical detail,"<sup>15</sup> was a useful reminder to search for minute details that would create a greater sense of world for the reader. For example, Ernest Hemingway's reputed dislike of Gerda Taro manifests in the line "He is brusque and rude, and later I am told he called me a *femme fatale*." Also, place names such as the *Café du Dôme*, a cafe frequented by Capa and Taro, are incorporated into "I was at *du Dôme* today and one couldn't stop boasting how everyone was buying up his work." Minute details such as these came largely from Jane Rogoyska's biographical work *Gerda Taro: Inventing Robert Capa*.<sup>16</sup>

Integral to my work is the transition between first, second and third person narrative, explored in *How to Write Fiction (And Think About it)*, as each has its own effect. First was to allow insight into Gerda's character, "A bitter taste haunts the back of my throat, and memories of smashed windows and scrawled words flit through my mind", while second created a personal, conversational tone with the reader. Lastly, third provided an overall perception of Gerda's wider context, and events occurring after her death, "Her death is immortalised on a gum wrapper and forgotten." I manipulated structure in two specific moments; when *The Falling Soldier*<sup>17</sup> was taken and in Ted Allan's note. The former was formatted into rectangle, mimicking a photograph, which was enhanced by inserting the actual photograph, *The Falling Soldier*, on the next page. The latter was written in a typewriter font to give authenticity and personality to the moment. This ability to exploit structure and font, and the greater detail facilitated by the form of a short story was best to convey the complexities of Taro's life and context.

Through this extensive manipulation of form, content, structure and language I hope to engage the reader and give insight into the fallibility of memory, subjectivity of history and communicative nature of photojournalism. Taro's life has long been forgotten, and with this story I hope to create interest in such a fascinating life once more.

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<sup>15</sup> Crooks, E n.d., *Seven Rules for Writing Historical Fiction*, Elizabeth Crook, accessed 10 May 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1QxYLkZ>>

<sup>16</sup> Rogoyska, J 2013, *Gerda Taro: Inventing Robert Capa*, Jonathan Cape, Great Britain.

<sup>17</sup> Capa, R 1936, *The Falling Soldier*, Photograph, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 15 May 2015, <<http://bit.ly/1RVEGXr>>