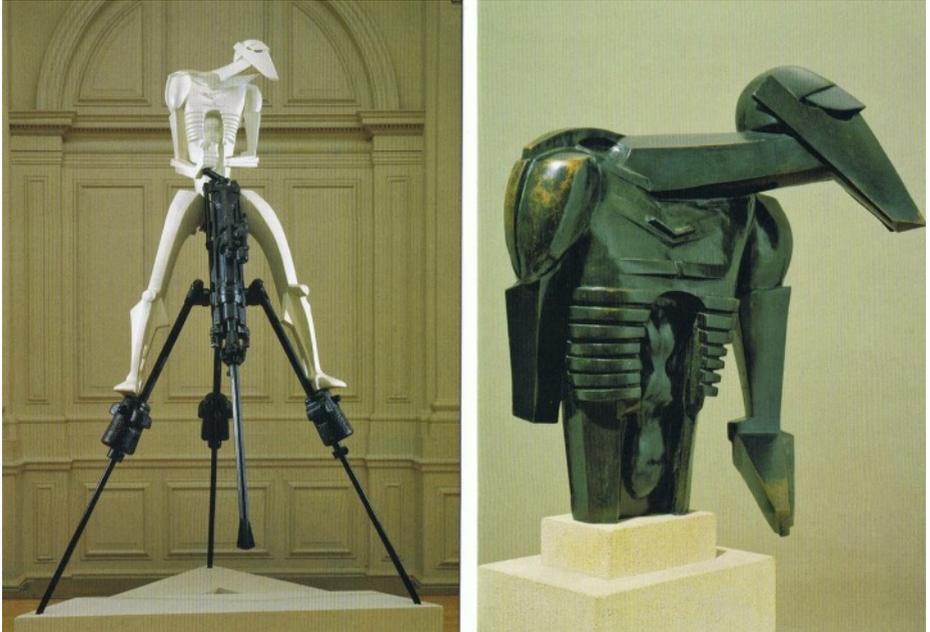


# Representing the Body in Wartime

## *Background Notes*

Monica Bohm-Duchen – 8 November 2017



Jacob Epstein: *Rock Drill*, 1913-15 + 2<sup>nd</sup> version, 1916

“It was in the experimental pre-war days of 1913 that I was fired to do the rock-drill, and my ardour for machinery (short-lived) expended itself upon the purchase of an actual drill, second-hand, and upon this I made and mounted a machine-like robot, visored, menacing, and carrying within itself its progeny, protectively ensconced. *Here is the armed, sinister figure of today and tomorrow. No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into...* (Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture*, 1940)



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## Representing the Body in Wartime

This seminar examines the ways in which the image of the soldier as heroic alpha-male, hitherto dominant in western art (the 17<sup>th</sup> century French artist Jacques Callot and 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish artist Francisco Goya were very much the exceptions here), was radically subverted by the brutal realities of 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare, in which, tragically, civilians of both sexes - including children - were implicated as much as professional fighting men. Shockingly, at the start of the century, 10% of all wartime casualties were civilians; by the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that figure had risen to 90%. Above all, it was the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that changed the perception of bodies in wartime forever.

Only in the mid-century dictatorships of Germany and Russia (and to a lesser extent, Spain, Italy and Japan) did this now obsolete trope persist. Elsewhere, conquering heroes are generally replaced by 'castrated Lancelots' (in British artist C.R.W. Nevinson's memorable phrase). The emphasis thus shifts to images of the suffering, endurance, camaraderie and sacrifice of ordinary soldiers (the latter often with reference to the suffering of Christ); while the horribly intimate and profoundly ambiguous relationship between men and machines often takes centre stage.

It also looks at the representation of women in wartime – where, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and despite the emergence of portraits of individual women doing their bit for the war effort, they tend to feature either as idealized embodiments of abstract concepts – Victory, Patriotism, Sacrifice etc. - or as (often dubiously eroticized) emblems of suffering. Rape, a sad but seldom-mentioned component of all wars, features only rarely. When children feature, it is frequently the New Testament story of the Massacre of the Innocents that underpins these images.

My main focus is necessarily on the two world wars, but I also look at other conflicts, right up to the present. Even before our present age of digital technology and drone warfare, some artists have chosen *not* to depict the effect of war on human bodies directly. Is this an evasion of responsibility – or a tacit admission of what has been called the “limits of representation”?



Horacio Ferrer's *Madrid 1937 (Black Aeroplanes)*, 1937

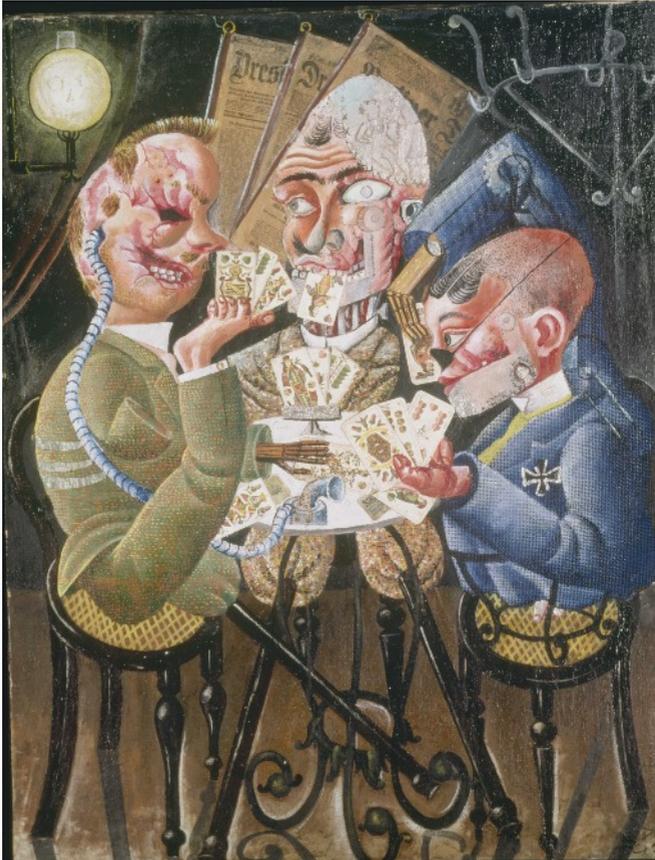
**And some other quotations to think about** (italics are mine)...

“He who wishes to be a surgeon should go to war” (Hippocrates, 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC)

“...a large German Air raid... there hovering above the town, like silver sequins in the sky, were ten Hun Gothas, and all around them little blobs of black, which were bursting shells... we suddenly saw one burst into flame and come sailing down to earth like some exquisite fire-work. *So beautiful was it that it was impossible to picture three men being burnt alive.*”(Thomas Lowinsky, letter to fellow British artist Charles Ricketts, 23 August 1917)

“We left the schoolrooms... and the few short weeks of instruction had bonded us *into one great body burning with enthusiasm*... The war thus seized hold of us like strong liquor. It was under a hail of flowers that we left, drunk on roses and blood. *Without a doubt, the war offered us grandeur, strength and gravity. It seemed to us like a virile exploit*... (Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 1920)

“... here ‘art’ enters the service of Marxist draft-dodging propaganda. The intention is manifest: the viewer is meant to see the soldier either as a murderer or a victim ... alongside caricatures of war cripples expressly designed to arouse repulsion ... we see German soldiers represented as simpletons, vile erotic wastrels, and drunkards. That not just Jews but “artists” of German blood could produce such botched and contemptible works... will forever remain a blot on the history of German culture.”(brochure accompanying the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, 1937)



**Otto Dix: *The Skat Players – Card-Playing War Cripples*, 1920**

“[he] had only one theme: the soldierly, heroic masculinity of our time” (of Elk Eber, one of Hitler’s favourite artists)

“The first breaking of a human being depended brutally on stripping clothes off one’s body, which began in our arrival in the camp and ended with a pile of corpses near the crematorium.” (Karol Konieczny, artist survivor of Buchenwald concentration camp)

“...What tragic elegance there was in those frail bodies, in details so precise: in the hands, the thin fingers, the feet; and in the mouths too, half open in a final attempt to catch one more breath of air; and in the bones covered with pale skin, barely touched with blue. I was haunted by the desire not to betray these diminished forms, to render them, as precious as I saw them, reduced to bare essentials. And I felt the irresistible urge to draw, so that this tremendous and tragic beauty might not escape me.”

“When we were there in the camp, people would often declare that this sort of thing could never happen again... But then, as time went by, I saw the same thing starting to happen again all over the world – in Vietnam, in the Gulag, in Latin America – everywhere. And I realized that what we had said in those days – that we would be the last people to experience such things – was not true: the truth is that *we were not the last.*” (Zoran Music, survivor of Dachau)



**Zoran Music: *We are not the Last*, early 1970s**

“In Japanese iconography and folk tales, ghosts and ghouls shuffle forward in a manner much like the Western version of the living dead... When the indescribably bright flash of the atomic bombs occurred, Japanese in the streets instinctively covered their eyes, and as a consequence suffered extreme burns on their arms and the backs of their hands. The pain was extreme, and best eased by holding one’s hands out exactly as the ghosts were said to do. (John W.Dower, 1996)



**Eitaro Ishigaki: *Disaster by Atomic Bomb*, 1946**

“...the war was over: it remained on our hands like a great, unwanted corpse, and there was no place on earth to bury it.” (Simone de Beauvoir, 1963)



Kerr Eby: *A Friend in Need (Jungle Rot)*, 1944

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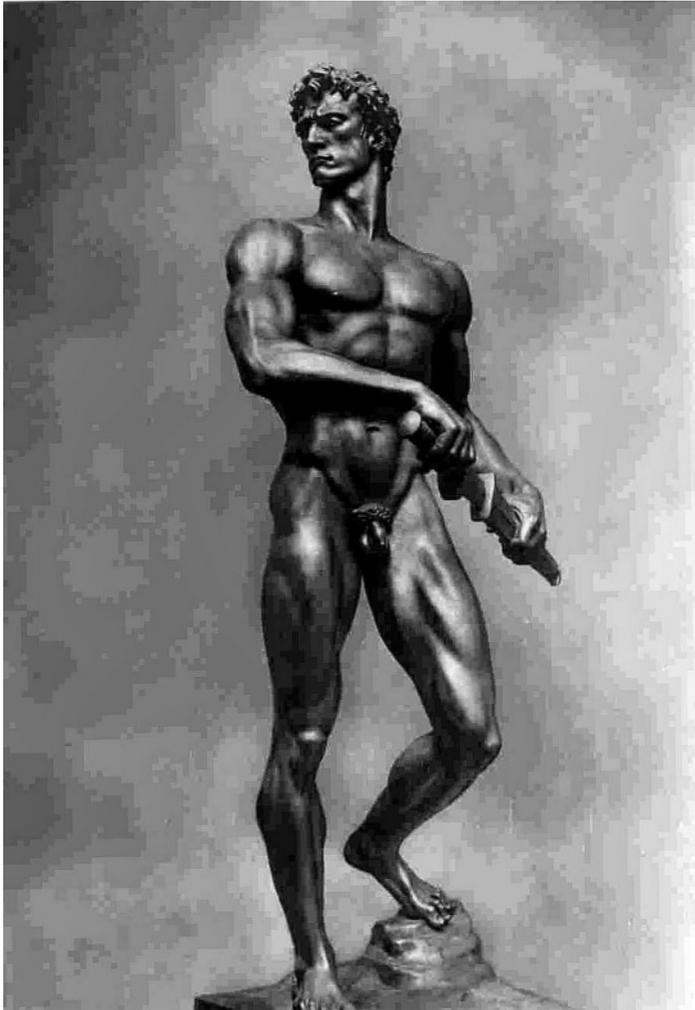
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