MILITARIZED VISUALITIES
PHOTOGRAPHED LANDSCAPE IN WWI GERMANY

This project examines the entanglement of military operations, photographic techniques, and landscape depictions during the First World War, illustrating how the intersection of these three fields created new visual modalities that fundamentally changed German visual culture.

In warfare, photography served a dual purpose: it was an airborne weapon—used to map territory and detect and bomb specific targets—and it constituted an informative medium employed to circulate persuading and aesthetically innovative content among civilians. Improved due to military necessity and mostly disseminated for propagandistic reasons, war photography modified the conception of space, extending the category of landscape to 1) scenery as a source of national identity, 2) sectioned terrains available to be interpreted and analyzed, and 3) cityscapes that lay in ruins.

In this study I argue that the Great War inaugurated an important turning point in the aesthetic representation of the landscape, radically transforming the act of seeing and establishing the modern understanding of space.

The notion of perspective (optical, graphical, and mental) is at the core of the dissertation. During the first aerial conflict in history, the land was photographed from “above” as well as from “below”: in a continuous tension between the abstraction of the vertical aerial views and the empathic representations of the battlefield at ground level, which depicted a landscape that remained only barren land. On the one hand, the power of the artificial eye enabled a surveillant way of seeing: a distanced, penetrating, and dangerous gaze; on the other hand, it unveiled incredible points of view on unexplored aspects of the world, as well as revealing the impact of industrial warfare on landscapes increasingly dominated by rigid man-made geometries.

Adopting a cross-disciplinary methodology, which interweaves military technology, landscape studies, and visual culture, I explore the production and circulation of landscape photography through the German printed media: analyzing illustrated newspapers, postcard collections, photographic almanacs, images created for educational purposes, and military imaging housed in various German War Archives. Moreover, I investigate how specific photo-optical artefacts (Soldier’s cameras, machine gun cameras, pigeon panoramic cameras, aerial cameras), photographic techniques (stereoscopy, Reihenbildner, mosaic maps) and visual deception (camouflage) challenged military activity, while remodeling civilians’ perception and conception of the landscape.

The transformative capacity of WWI military photography changed habits of vision, influencing people’s ways of observing and absorbing the world and determining the aesthetic canons of the German society in the following period of the Weimar Republic.