

HST 209: American History: Civil War W14 (Escobar 32165)

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Forum 3 ► Civil War Photography

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(Civil War Photography) Next >



Civil War Photography

by Joe Escobar - Sunday, January 26, 2014, 10:08 PM

To post, you will click the "reply" link MY post. If you want to reply to a specific comment made by another student, click the "reply" link located on that student's specific post.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES As in all forums, put something descriptive in the subject line of your post, such as Confused Identity or Moved Body. Other students wanting to talk about the same issue can click the "reply" button to your post, thus helping organize this discussion.

Sum of ratings: -

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Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 27, 2014, 12:51 PM

1. It is tough to decide which of the two examples of manipulation is more disturbing. Both examples make me wonder whether or not I can believe any sort of photography posted anywhere in the world. The "confused identity" example is a tough concept to comprehend because these simple photos of men lying dead on the battlefield are what can convince citizens about what is happening in the war. People base their ideas and thoughts on the information they are given. If a Union or Confederate family saw these photos of what the photographer posted as either Union or Confederate based on his influences, the family would worry that their side of the war could be losing. It would also be more concerning when it came to military leaders and politicians viewing these photos. If a photograph was altered and then sent to a military commander who saw pictures of his own soldiers dead across a battlefield somewhere across the country, it could influence that man to make very important decisions that could cost many more lives. Based on the "confused identity" and "moved body" cases, I do not think that I can trust information I am given based on photography that was taken during this era. Anything that I look at could be a completely different reality than what seems to be the truth. This apparently was very common during this time as well, which leads me to believe that

there are many more photos that do not depict the truth.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Katherine Frank - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 12:55 PM

I think that newspapers have always distorted the truth and printed pictures to enhance their side of the story. It goes on today as it has forever. I don't think we can depend on "news footage" to determine historical accuracy especially for this era, and I don't think we are for this class. I continue to think of "The Civil War" series as an enhancement to our text book.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Kristine Wallace - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 1:44 PM

Newspapers are infamous for printing one-sided stories depending on their particular perspective. Political, religious, anti-this, pro-that--you name it depending on what they feel is the "right" way. I do not believe there is an outlet of media that will not have some sort of bias, one which is not trying to turn other people toward "their" way of thinking.

This is the same with the photographs and narrations we read this week, as well as Ken Burns film and any other book we read on the Civil War. It is hard to find someone who truly is not in favor of one side or the other.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Austin Crook - Thursday, January 30, 2014, 1:14 PM

If this is true that nearly all writing has some bias in it, even from historical content, how should schools go about deciding what kind of history books to refer to? I definitely agree with what you are saying, but it is disturbing to think about the history books that our students learn from being biased or "subtly" teaching our youth only what they want them to learn. Is there any solution to this problem, or is it just something we have to deal with?

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 3:58 PM

That's exactly what our job, as students, is: to sort through materials and sources, identify biases and perspectives, learn what they contribute to the greater conversation, and move on to other sources. It's tedious work, but viewing the study of history as anything but intellectually labor-intensive is not really being a student of history. Studying is work. Developing and using critical thinking skills is the solution. That is what we are practicing in this forum.

Newspapers and shows are all notorious for exaggerating and sensationalizing information, it's true, but not always for the purpose of misinforming. Sometimes it's a necessary tool to cut through the public's jaded disinterest and capture attention. Journalistic sources have a different job than scholars and academics. Capturing attention to relay information is not the same as teaching. That being said, yes, even textbooks written by academics and educators are biased.

This is not a contemporary issue, but is rather a perennial zeitgeist throughout time. Viewed from another perspective, it's not a zeitgeist at all, but rather a system that allows for individual perspectives. When reading a scholarly textbook, we can at least trust that the author/s are well-informed, capable of critical thinking, and have undergone a peer-review process. No, this does not mean it's unbiased, but it does mean it's not a falsehood. When new students enter the discipline, they locate flaws in past perspectives and write based on their own perspectives. The process is tedious, and sometimes arduous. For a student to demand an unbiased book or documentary that offers a complete narrative of events is an unrealistic and overly-simplistic demand.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 6:44 PM

Coming back to Ken Burns and his use of the manipulated photos; I don't think it was unethical or dishonest to use such resources. All primary sources --diaries, photos, letters, etc-- are biased in what they wanted to communicate. Just because Mary Chestnut wrote in her diary that she intended it to be an objective account doesn't automatically mean she wasn't filtering all of her words through her particular way of understanding the events. Therefore, any use of primary sources must take those biases into account. I'm glad that Burns didn't perpetuate the sharpshooter and false identity stories. However, as I wrote before, I think he could have and should have discussed photographers' tendency to fabricate stories and images. That's an interesting aspect of the era.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Confused Identity vs. Moved Body

by Suzanne LeGro - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 9:02 PM

I think it is so important to call out those who would manipulate images for their own gain or to purport their particular agenda. I can forgive Gardner for making the choices that he made, but for these kinds of things to be happening in our day and age is ridiculous to me. I am glad the point has been made of our contemporary media altering the facts to suit their needs and while I know this is happening all over the place, by many different people, I just don't understand how we can not learn from actions such as Gardners. I guess I feel like we should "know better" than that, but apparently that is not the case today.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Pictures vs. text

by Austin Crook - Monday, January 27, 2014, 12:54 PM

1. I would think that altering the text would be more concerning than the images. If writing is altered than that could mean that complete stories in textbooks and novels could be incorrect. If that is the case then millions of textbooks that help teach our nation's youth could have false information in them. People who study history usually take more time to read textbooks and evaluate the writing more then evaluating photographs. This is why false text would be more of a concern than an altered photograph.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Pictures vs. text

by Katherine Frank - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 12:39 PM

I would agree if these pictures and written words were for a text book, but they were for a newspaper, notorious for misinformation. If Ken Burns or any other "Historian" were to rely on newsprint or photos, I would have to question the historical accuracy of all of their information. Again I believe this photo and writings were to show the horrors of war for both sides.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Pictures vs. text

by Jacob Hutchins - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 9:30 PM

I think it's also easier to make a mistake with falsified photographs, particularly old one. If I recall correctly, much civil war photography was often thought to be.... dubious, at best. It wasn't enough to just take pictures of dead bodies; they had to make it look as bad or particular as possible. And people looking at them at the time were none the wiser. This reminds me strongly of photos taken of Indians during the westward expansion; often, you see photos that are very carefully staged with elaborate regalia and headdresses when they were completely not applicable to the tribe pictured. In their own way, these things can be powerful by themselves- their age sort of warrants a type of respect. It's always a little disheartening, though, to think about how much of history could be falsified without us ever knowing it.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Kyle Housley - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 10:34 AM

Which of the two “cases” (confused identity or moved body) was more egregious to you, when it came to manipulating the data/image.

Between the two cases; the case of the moved body was more egregious to me. The act alone, not to mention making up a narrative on how they died is disrespectful beyond comprehension. Not saying that the confused identity case wasn't bad, but it pales in comparison to actually moving and posing bodies.

Do you think we can discover the historical truth about this time period when some of the very things we rely on, such as photographs, have been altered.

Yes I do. Everything we rely on hasn't been altered. So gaining information from the photographs and writings that we find evidence of being real would still be beneficial. I think when accessing information from the time period; it should be looked at critically as well.

Which is worse, changing what is written or revealed in print, which relies on the comprehension of the reader, or when images are involved, which relies on the sense of sight, the eyes of the viewer? Is there a difference?

I think they are equally bad. Just because some people are more visual and some would rather read. So altering one might not affect someone who does the other. So I don't think there is a difference.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Austin Crook - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 12:30 PM

I agree that moving a body and changing the story of how that person died creates a whole other issue. If that person is identified by family or friends, and reads a story about how their loved one died that is not true. It is not only affecting our understanding of the history, but also affecting individuals emotions and lives with lies.

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Historical Photography

by Katherine Frank - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 12:26 PM

I found both cases to be equally disturbing. I found both cases to be equally disgusting. I don't think we can rely on "news" articles or photographs to give us historical facts. I do, however, think that the intended results were to show the horror of the war and to assign the "good guy" role to the Union and keep the public aroused and up in arms against the Rebels.

There is a difference between the comprehension of the written word and the vision of a photo. A photo appears to lend a certain truth to a story, whether it deserves it or not so I think changing or staging a photo is worse than enhancing a story. Of course I would feel that changing the story or staging a photo in a text, or history book would both be wrong.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Historical Photography

by Benjamin Trautman - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 8:26 PM

I too agree that the main purpose for these photographs was to continue to influence a sort of hatred towards the South. Less of an informative style, but rather a more confrontational style. Gardner wanted to show the sickening kind of picture a battle produces after the firing stops. I remember there was a quote from Burn's episode 3 about what a battlefield looked like after the fighting that really struck me, that the battlefield had an, "singular crawling effect." This gave me chills hearing this, just a thought though. I also am on your side that there is a big difference between photos and text, a photo does lend a certain truth to a story, maybe more of an emotional truth? Whereas text is what most readers rely on for facts, unless you rely on the comics to give you the daily news. A reader can look at a photo and see what kind of aftermath there is to a battle, but they cannot not know just from a photo of the tactics that went on, or who did what. Thank you for your thoughts!

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Kristine Wallace - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 1:37 PM

It is incredibly hard to figure which of the two examples is worse. My thinking at this point would be the Moved Body simply because the photographers were so desperate as to move a dead body, then make it seem that it was two different people, than to go on to lie and say the body was still there in November. In this scenario they manipulated a dead war hero for their own advantage (writing a book for sheer entertainment value). In the Confused Identity, the worse I believe was simply the photographer(author) trying to make the Union army seem like the ultimate war hero while the Confederates were nothing but a rotten band of trouble makers who deserved to die.

Now, in the case of historical truths, it is of course hard to believe everything as seen BUT what the viewer can get from this material is that this was a horrible war and that many men and children did die on the battlefields. It may have been Union soldiers or Confederate but the fact was that people did expire. Both Union and Confederates despite their reasons for going into battle still had a passion for what they were there for. They all had families, loved ones, homes and dreams that were shattered. This is what we should take from the photographs.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Courtney Waterman - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 8:29 PM

I really like your last point. A problem with looking at things that happened so long ago is that sometimes it can be easy to forget that they were a lot like we are now, and in the big scheme of things we really aren't that different. Remembering that we're alike, and remembering like you said, that "they all had families, loved ones, homes, and dreams that were shattered" we can find connections, and we can *still* learn from these photographs even though they've been altered.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Suzanne LeGro - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 8:54 PM

I, too, appreciate your point, I hadn't really thought of the families of those in the photographs. I wonder what they were told of their loved ones last moments. Perhaps having a heroic telling of events, like those that Gardner wrote, was actually a comfort to them. I guess I would rather think that my son or husband fought bravely and died with honor than just a representation of the facts. I think history is probably full of instances like that, where a story was altered to provide comfort in a time of grief. And in many ways I don't really think that is a bad thing.

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What is the image used to convey?



by Christopher Plourde - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 3:18 PM

To fully answer the question as to whether or not Ken Burn's use of these photos is disturbing or not depends on the narrative that surrounds their use. If the images are used merely to depict the carnage of battle than I would say that their use was appropriate as it would not depend on either the identity or location. If the narrative gives the specific false details that originally accompanied the photograph than this would be more problematic. If, however, the narrative was a true accounting and the images used to portray it were not, then the misinformation is of a less harmful nature as the viewer still has received knowledge that he/she, hither to, did not possess. Ultimately much of what could be termed "egregious error" has to be balanced with effectiveness in portraying the facts. It is also dependent upon the strength of the "microscope", so to speak, that you put it under as flaws of this kind are a function of focus. Thus, for a historian, such errors would seem more problematic measured against there own understanding and expectations. In a sense, they have seen the "forest" sufficiently to be interested in the trees. To those learning about the Civil War, they do not have a conceptual framework necessary for the minutia to even appear relevant. While I am not suggesting that even a well intended error should be overlooked, it is important to pull back a bit to gain a more "panoramic" view to recognize their significance.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: What is the image used to convey?



by Austin Crook - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 10:09 AM

I think that is a great point about the written context given with each of these photos can affect whether or not misplacing the men and scenes is disrespectful or not. If there are some photos of men who had been placed in another setting or their bodies had been moved around a little bit, but the narrative does not alter the historical facts, then that may be considered tolerable.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Everything is Biased



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 5:32 PM

For me, the moved body was more disturbing than the mixed identities. It seems more morbid. I don't approve of the fabricated dramas attached in either case, but I'm also not surprised. Photographs are no different than illustrations, paintings, cartoons, sketches, or even woodcuts. In all cases, the images are creations made by humans that wish to communicate their perspective. Ansel Adams' American Landscapes are a perfect example of this. His photographs have been labeled as propaganda by many artists who argue he's created a mythology of wilderness majesty.

Does the camera ever lie? The camera always shows a perspective. I don't know when

people began thinking that photographs are objective but it's a completely false notion. Landscape photographers frequently angle their shots to cut out the power-lines or airplanes. Who thinks that National Geographic photographers aren't manipulating their images, if in no other way than not publishing a picture they didn't want to show?

I don't think the "Truth" of any past era can ever be fully understood because it's different for each person who lived in that time. Therefore, to approach our studies with the expectation of unbiased sources and completely indisputable facts is inherently flawed. Searching for a completely objective source is a useless exercise.

I am surprised that Burns didn't mention the manipulations though. He hasn't, so far, mentioned the fabricated dramas attached to them, but he has used them for his own purposes. Even though journalists today still show their own perspective, they must do it in less blatant ways. If a war journalist did such a thing today they would be ostracized, perhaps even prosecuted for desecration of a soldier's body. It's interesting that it happened then and I think it could have been an interesting addition to Burns' narrative. However, the opposite extreme has existed in our times: images of soldiers caskets returning home were banned. Not showing a picture, or preventing such images from being seen, is just as biased as showing a manipulated one.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Everything is Biased



by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 10:47 PM

Photographs are definitely subjective and I'm glad that you pointed that you pointed that out. When it comes to pictures the saying "seeing is believing" really applies but we also have to remember that we are only seeing what the photographer has chosen to show us, and that while they do tell a story they don't tell the *whole* story.

Your mentioning of what would happen if a journalist did this today, made me think of Narciso Contreras. He was just recently fired by the AP for manipulating the background of a picture he took in Syria. Here's a link to that if you haven't heard about it and want to read a bit on it. <http://blog.ap.org/2014/01/22/ap-reacts-to-alteration-of-photo/> I can only imagine how much worse the penalty for moving a body would be, or at least I hope it would be worse.

And I also agree that this could have been an interesting addition for Burns' documentary, even if it was a quick ten minutes or so.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Everything is Biased



by Kristine Wallace - Thursday, January 30, 2014, 3:15 PM

Timothy, yes I agree that it does show a perspective in most cases. I can say that a lot of people will "doll" themselves up before taking a picture so of course we are not getting the "real" picture in a good number of cases.

But, in saying that, I think the overall idea behind the photos taken during this time period was one in which to show the viewer the overall horror of war. I think it is horrible that certain things were staged but there is the fact that these people did in fact die in a tragic manner. So, despite the staging, we are still given a view of these poor individuals that did expire during this time period.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: Everything is Biased



by Timothy Wilson-Haley - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 1:03 PM

Yes, I agree that Ken Burns used these photos to portray the destruction caused by the war, and he did it well. Showing the visuals of dead bodies --individual and multiple-- and destroyed trains, buildings, and towns visually describes as closely as possible the now-unimaginable level of destruction. However, we must constantly be aware that these images are not objective descriptions. They are manipulations meant to show a particular perspective, dissimilar to modern photojournalism only in the extend of physical manipulations and fabricated stories. Frassanito described the old duel-lense photos as similar to modern television. It makes sense to me that photographers would sensationalize their subject for much of the same purposes as contemporaries do. Our job as media consumers and history students is to cut through the sensationalization and attempt to perceive reality. Absolutely, these photos show the physical reality of death and destruction, but they also still hold the potential to cause misperceptions. These images are a rich resource for Burns to have used, but I think he walks a fine line by not discussing the tendency for manipulation.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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The Case of the Moved Body



by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 10:10 PM

While they're both awful, I find the case of the moved body to be the worst of the two. It really angers me to think that someone would move the body of a fallen soldier just to create a "message" or a more striking picture. If a family member of that soldier saw the two images it would've added so much unneeded confusion. Even though these have been altered I think that we can discover the historical truth but it will take more work than just looking at the images and piecing the stories together. It would take more people like Frassanito to be willing to mull through all the images and check them for things that look odd and out of place. Maybe as technology advances discovering things like this will become easier. Perhaps face recognition will one day be able to point out the same face in multiple images.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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There's Not a Difference





by Courtney Waterman - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 10:19 PM

I've been trying to decide which one is worse when it comes to deceiving people in print or deceiving people with pictures, and I'm not really sure that there is much of a difference. Either way, the information that's being presented has been altered and only the message that author or photographer wants to share is being shared. I expect writers and photographers to have biases and I expect their work to have undertones of those biases but changing it to the point of fabrication is manipulative and dishonest, especially when people are relying on them as news sources.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: There's Not a Difference



by Christopher Plourde - Saturday, February 1, 2014, 10:31 PM

Given the fact that Gardner moved the bodies and created this false narrative around it I don't think that the dishonesty behind it mattered to him at all. He was out to make a buck. I suspect that he was only one of many who did such a thing. But that tells us something about the times. It sort of reminds me of the snake oil salesman, a contemporary figure, who had the magic cure all. Of course they were quacks....but they were colorful figures from one point of view. On the other hand they preyed on people's misfortune and robbed them of their money. The photo and the story were fabrications but it is history, just not of the actual battle. The exception being the carnage of war, without which such a photo would not have been possible.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: There's Not a Difference



by Courtney Waterman - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 8:17 PM

Unfortunately, I think that's a good suspicion about Gardner not being the only one to manipulate photographs in this way. History is certainly full of people capitalizing off of the misfortune of others. Keeping the people like Gardner and the snake oil salesman in mind though gives history and the stories that surround it another layer, a layer that a lot of the time is over looked. Their acts may have been dishonorable and all about money or fame but looking at them and learning about them allows us to see a bigger fuller picture.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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most egregious



by Benjamin Trautman - Wednesday, January 29, 2014, 10:40 PM

Both of these modifications to the pictures are very disturbing. It makes you think that just because they did not have an easy way to alter a picture like we do now days, that it did not

stop the photographer. After seeing the first picture, the thing that stood out to me most, and I'm sure others, is the expression the soldier facing the camera had on his face. His mouth was open, looked like he was in a lot of pain, and any other emotion you may have when you know you probably not going to make it. My heart dropped when I saw his face. I imagine many northerners when they saw this picture maybe felt a sense of accomplishment, or "you deserve that" kind of attitude. But I am sure some felt remorse and sympathy. The pictures about the sharpshooter did not have as much of an impact on me. I don't think I would have had more sympathy for the sharpshooter if he was near his post of rocks, or on a hill. But then again comes the question, was he really a sharpshooter? As much influence as the photographer wanted to place on the Union's skill of sharpshooting, it did not seem like he was a sharpshooter to the researcher and gun. I think the most egregious photo would be the one of the mistaken identities, for the facial expressions of the person the photo shows and the disrespect it shows toward the dead. For the sake of getting a silly point across, that the rebels died in anguish, because they "deserved it" according to the photographer. If somehow I knew my family member was recognized as a rebel, but instead was a Union soldier who gave his life to his country, I think that photographer would have a knock on his door late at night.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: most egregious

by Kristine Wallace - Friday, January 31, 2014, 4:42 PM

I do believe that you have touched on what should be the main focus of the Civil War photography. Yes, the historical information should be accurate but I do not believe we can really get that now considering how long ago this happened. But, what we can understand is the agony and pain that was experienced by the soldiers during the war. As you mentioned, you can see it on their faces and THIS is what should be our focal point if we are not to believe all the historical narratives. I believe we are to walk away as viewers of a horrible time in our nation's history, where so many men and children were killed and wounded. So many families lost fathers, sons, homes, livelihoods and so much more. This is the truly tragic part and we can only glean but a bit of this in the photography.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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historical truth shaken

by Benjamin Trautman - Saturday, February 1, 2014, 7:46 PM

It is very hard to rely on something that has been altered for dramatic effect. I feel as if we need to try and understand, if we can, the exact reasoning behind why someone would alter a photograph. Gardner could have been doing this for dramatic effect, attempting to get a point across, or just out of sheer laziness. (in the mistaken identity case). Who knows though what reasons, maybe personal, Gardner acted upon. Was he just trying to make an extra buck or reveal a political belief? Did he maybe not want to walk around the entire battlefield and carry his equipment? But instead he photographed the same deceased soldiers from different angles. It is unfair to the soldiers, families of those soldiers, and American public. Also it is very unfair to the people who want to learn the true history of our

nation's Civil War. The historical truth, in my opinion, has been inflicted a serious wound when acts like this take place. It is an injustice when these things go unnoticed for many years and not brought to the public's attention. It is hard to rely on a foundation built upon personal ambition and self-gratification. Gardner weakened a little bit of the truth behind the battle of Antietam.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: historical truth shaken

by Christopher Plourde - Saturday, February 1, 2014, 10:17 PM

Gardner was trying to make a buck and to do so he was playing to his audience, the Union. But that was the times and it is also history. Photography flourished at the time because many were willing to pay for such photos and the "propaganda" was fairly common. That, in and of itself, shows us a bit of history despite the inaccuracies. All of it is historical record, the actual events of the battle being only part of the whole. So I would not look at it as a fraud being perpetuated on the American public, because, in a sense that is what the public wanted to see and what they wanted to hear. Consequently, we now know more about the history of the time. Also they were photos of Gettysburg, not Antietam though I am sure it occurred there as well.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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changing the print/there is a difference

by Benjamin Trautman - Saturday, February 1, 2014, 8:01 PM

I feel as if changing the print in a newspaper or magazine is worse than changing a photograph. To me, photographs can only tell part of a story, a photograph captures a split second account of what was going on. Though people say a picture can speak a thousand words, are these words facts or just someone's thoughts about the photograph? I think people rely on print more than they rely on photographs to tell them what happened. If the print was changed to achieve a personal vendetta, than the reader is being fed a load of manure. Though during this time period it was probably very hard to know if the print was dishonest or not. The technology they had may have made it difficult to validate a story in the newspaper. If you knew someone who was at the battle then they could validate the newspapers' cover of the story, but if not, I imagine it was very hard to discredit the newspaper. The difference between photographs and print is that I believe photographs offer the audience with emotion, they could see what it may have been like to be there. Photographs have a powerful way of moving someone, more powerful than the way a writer chooses his or her words, in my opinion. Print can paint a picture but the eye cannot see that picture, only the mind can form the words into something visual to itself. I believe photographs are a nice compliment to text, but cannot be used as the only source of justification.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: changing the print/there is a difference



by Christopher Plourde - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 9:02 PM

There is one way that they would be equally wrong. Though not "history", imagine a criminal case in which a photograph or photographs were doctor in such a way to support a conclusion that either let a guilty man walk free or send a guiltless man to prison. Ultimately the magnitude of the wrong done would depend on its effect. Also, in this particular case, there is the problem of the morbidity and disrespect involvedbut they are separate issues.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1

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Re: Civil War Photography



by Suzanne LeGro - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 8:42 PM

I am finding it very hard to decide which "side" I am on in regards to which case is more egregious to me. I think both are quite harmful when it comes to using these images and their narratives as accurate historical documents. Of course, the actions of Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan are in and of themselves a piece of history and I am glad to know that their images have been manipulated. I don't really appreciate the creative license Gardner took in how he described the scenes presented. I think that captions definitely have a huge impact on how you see the photograph. The caption explains to the viewer what was going on at the time of the photograph and if that information is not accurate, then how can we trust the accuracy of the photograph. On the other hand, I find it kind of disturbing how easily he was able to move bodies around and display them in ways that he wanted. I guess things were just different back then in regards to dealing with death and corpse. I feel that Gardner was very much the sensationalist, who was really just trying to sell a certain viewpoint and story. I certainly now feel that I cannot trust the work of Alexander Gardner. The thing that I am really disappointed in is that Ken Burns uses these images without some sort of disclaimer. I am finding that my whole view of Burns as this awesome documentarian is fading and being replaced by doubt in the accuracy of what he is presenting. I am all for some action when it comes to my history but I still want to feel that there is truth presented. I am really beginning to doubt Burns at this point.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Thoughts on Alexander gardner



by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 10:42 PM

I was having some trouble really making up my mind one way or another in answer to the topic question. Finally, I decided to start the thing... at the start and looked up the biography of both Alexander Gardner and his former employer/rival Mathew Brady. As the 2 principally credited photographers of the conflict, I thought understanding the men themselves might help me address the question more effectively.

A wiki search of Gardner

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Gardner_\(photographer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Gardner_(photographer))) turned up a couple of interesting things.

First, it seems that he was not the photographer that Mathew Brady was. As far as technical skill I can't say, but Brady was by far the more prominent photographer during the war period (although he died penniless) and I think it's not unreasonable to conclude this may have motivated Gardner all the more to try and elaborate on his settings and work.

Second, as the wiki article points out, making these kind of changes to photos was not, it seems, something that was looked down on at the time they were taken. It's strange to think that the modern day understanding of journalistic integrity was not present at the time, but I suppose presentism in our historical understanding may not always be obvious to us.

Lastly, I found it funny that the wiki article makes reference to Gardners later pictures of Native Americans; I brought up, in a previous post, some thoughts on pictures taken of Natives that reminded me of these civil war photos- completely unaware that I was talking about potentially the same man!

Brady, from what I can tell (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathew_Brady) does not appear to have the same type of controversy surrounding his work. I attribute this to A) a lack, perhaps, of the same type of forensic examination of his work and B) the fact that he didn't take many of the photographs he owned the rights to, thus doing an end-run around the discussion of integrity to begin with. I mean, if a guy makes his living hiring other people to take his pictures, it probably wouldn't be surprising to find out they were often staged.

With this type of information rolling around in my head, I think i'm in a better place to address the specific forum topic.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Problems of Integrity in Historical Documentaion



by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 10:58 PM

The question of which of these 2 photographs/accompanying short essays was more egregious presents, I think, a problem from the very beginning; what sort of standard am I to use for judging them? If I examine these journalistic works from the perspective of the 21st century, I find them to be both quite blatant examples of low journalistic fiber and a confusing distortion of the historical record. But it's important to try and step away from the past and make an attempt to understand the context these photographs were taken in. It is very easy to slide into presentism, particularly when faced with a situation that has obviously been distorted.

In the modern day, journalistic practices adhere (more or less) to a system of "journalistic ethics and standards". I figured something of this sort had to exist, so a wikipedia search of the phrase "journalistic integrity" led me to information concerning how journalistic ethics regulation is described today. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalistic_integrity) While there is a great deal of information there regarding these things in the present, I had difficulty in locating such standards for the years the Civil War took place. At length, I can only conclude that they did not really exist in any broad sense.

In light of that, I think it's safe to say that Gardner was practicing documentation- as well as making a buck- in a way that was at least tacitly condoned at the time. And, with that in mind, I can temper my understanding of what he was trying to do with the knowledge that he was acting normally for his era. So, if Gardner, and by implication his industry at large,

was simply doing what they did, the distortion seems far less egregious (although still blatantly true) than it previously had.

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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What to Make of the Camera When It Lies



by Jacob Hutchins - Sunday, February 2, 2014, 11:13 PM

With a fuller understanding of both the man, the industry, and some perspective on his time, I find that the more distasteful example given to us is the Case of the Moved Body.

In a way, the camera always lies; photographers are always attempting to construct a composition when they take a picture, and that composition is determined by the photographers imagination and artistic flair. As far as historical works are concerned, I feel safe in assuming that the bias from any artist during such a tense, violent time as a civil war would be present in their pictures and figure that they have all been carefully composed to tell a story based on that bias.

But there is composition.... and there is *composition*. Physically removing a slain soldier from his place of death and arranging him like (no irony/pun intended) some sort of still life is fairly repugnant to me. Interpreting a scene, as happens with the Case of the Confused Identity, is one thing; simply making a scene up is something else entirely. To put it another way, I feel like the Case of the Moved Body is more or less a flat-out lie. Gardner could be understood, if not condoned, for his interpretations... but if he was just dragging bodies around it leaves us with no real way to gauge whether or not what our eyes are seeing ever actually took place. The whole purpose of a historical photograph is to document what took place, not make up what *could* have taken place if events had unfolded in a completely different way.

My previous posts still stand; I recognize that the practices Gardner took part in were basically normal for his time, and he most certainly could not have been the only guy to do this type of thing. But if I had to chose, I would say the second case study leaves me more troubled about the issue of historical accuracy.

I think it would have been beneficial if Ken Burns had included this information, or at least some of this information, in his documentary. Not specifically about these pictures, but a mention of the very issue of inaccurate photo practices would have made it (I believe) more educationally valuable as a learning tool.

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