

HST 209: History of the Civil War W18 (Escobar 31595)

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Civil War Photography

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Civil War Photography

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, January 27, 2018, 11:17 PM

This thread is for discussions on the Civil War Photography topic.

To make your POSTS, click the reply link in this, MY post. To reply to another student's post, be sure to click the reply link within in THEIR post.

IMPORTANT - SUBJECT LINES

BE SURE to use an informative subject line for your post, something that describes which question(s) you are addressing . Do NOT simply leave it RE: Civil War Photography

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Manipulation of Photographs

by Sydney Hall - Monday, January 29, 2018, 1:09 PM

Out of the two cases provided, the case of the moved body was the one that struck more strongly to me. A series of photographs created by Alexander Gardner shows evidence of photographers altering the position of dead bodies. Personally, I didn't think there would be staging in photos back then. The fact that a photographer would grab a corpse and move it for photographs feels morally wrong, even if the said person was trying to evoke emotions out of those who would see the photos. On the other hand in reference to the case of confused identity, it makes sense that there would be confusion in black and white photographs from many years ago.

Altering what is written is something that has always been going on, whether it is from other point of views, things trying to be covered up, etc. When it comes to photos, they feel more personal to me because you are seeing what someone else saw but instead of through their eyes, it is through a lens. Granted that it is possible that some of these civil war photographs that we have seen are staged, it doesn't mean that it completely takes out the value or the story behind it. Instead, it feels more like a casual reminder that not everything is what it seems.

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Are we being told lies through our eyes?

by Rose Thomas - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 1:19 PM

Paparazzi's use Photoshop and manipulation all the time. Changing the way stars look to help fit the story they are trying to convey. This is obviously not a new trick. The pictures of "The Case of Confused Identity" show just that. The pictures were taken at two different angles to portray what the photographer wanted. He also probably hoped that no one would ever be the wiser. If you can make double the money wouldn't you want to as well? When photographers do this it makes it really hard to know what is true or not. Knowing what uniforms the either side was wearing helps in identifying them in the picture. But what if they are not wearing their jackets or pins? Then we just have to take the photographers word for it, which can sometimes end up being wrong. I think the only way to TRULY know if the photo is real or not is to either have been there or have a time machine so we can go back and find out.

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Re: Are we being told lies through our eyes?

by Hannah Cartwright - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 9:49 AM

I never thought about it that way, but after reading your post, I agree with you, Rose. It is easy for us to be upset when photographers manipulate photos or change the story of certain photos because of course we want to know the truth of the photos and do not want the photographer to, in a more blunt way of saying it, lie to us. Yet, that is sometimes the art of photographs. Not everything is going to be super exciting and thrilling, and photographers, whether it be Gardner taking photographs of the civil war, or photographers today, make money off how exciting and interesting their photos are, so of course they are going to nick their photos from time to time. Of course we all wish we could find out every detail of the Civil War, and just history in general, and going off what you said, you're right. There is no way we can figure out every detail of what happened, and we just have to work with the historic evidence that is given to us. Though all of the photos and stories may not be completely true, it's closer than we would be without it.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Everyone wants to make a buck

by Rose Thomas - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 12:42 PM

Hannah,

You are right. There is something to be said for "it's closer than we would be without it". That is absolutely true. We wouldn't know a lot about history if it weren't for photographs and drawings. But I think as historians it is our job to "weed out the bad ones" so to speak. Meaning, if we find something out to not be true we need to let people know about it. I love history and have taken many classes over the years. But I have never once been told that some of the photos are not real. When I am learning something in school or from a book I like to know that what I am looking at is true. After reading those articles it has made me look at history in a different light. Because you are right, everyone wants to make a buck, and if they have to Photoshop something to do it, they will.

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Re: Everyone wants to make a buck

by Sydney Hall - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 1:53 PM

Rose, you bring up a good point when you said, "...if we find something out to not be true we need to let people know about it." Now knowing that there was altered and misidentification in photography during the civil (*plus* the Ballou letter), I think it's safe to say that Ken Burns did not shed light entirely on some of the content he was presenting in his civil war series. As of now, I feel a bit uneasy wondering what else could possibly be communicated partially true to the us in later episodes.

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Re: Are we being told lies through our eyes?

by Heather Saxon - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 11:31 AM

Rose-

I agree that the photographer hoped no one would be none-the-wiser, though I'm frustrated that he was apparently right for several decades until historians started examining photos more closely. But your post got me thinking, and besides the clothes and pins, I wonder if another method of identification would be the bodies themselves. It's a stretch, but in general, the Confederate soldiers were greatly more emaciated than Union soldiers, and their clothes were often more torn up and worn (which I think would help with identification in absence of color as well). It's mentioned in our book that Lee's army, when marching toward Maryland, had been surviving on green apples and green corn for weeks, and were so torn up and unbathed it disgusted the Northern residents. Even if it couldn't confirm anything, especially with bodies bloating after death, perhaps seeing the state of clothes and how skinny a soldier is in a photo could help determine something about their origin in absence of pins and color.

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Re: Are we being told lies through our eyes?

by Leah Livesay - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 10:51 PM

Hi Rose!

I completely agree with you, the only way to really know is to have been there. To me, that's really unfortunate as that is obviously not possible. Until seeing these photos and reading the articles around them, I had honestly never thought too far into photos such as these from such a long time ago. I never would have expected such misdirection from a source from that time period regarding such a terrible war. These days you expect images to be altered in one way or another and you really don't know what is real or not. So with the obvious altered images and information with these Civil War photos, how do we know if we are being told the true story? The case of the moved body images really shocked me, to think a photographer would go as far as to move a dead soldier's body to take more pictures just baffles me!

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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The shock of confused identity and the moved body.

by Hannah Cartwright - Tuesday, January 30, 2018, 8:41 PM

While I read the articles regarding Alexander Gardner and the way he was able to manipulate the photos he had taken of the civil war, I found myself the most egregious about the confused body. I feel that Gardner lying about a story about the civil war, such as two separate photos of dead soldiers at the battlefield of Gettysburg, where he says one photo is of Confederate soldiers, and the other Union, yet it was proven that those two photos were of the same soldiers dead in the same spot, just at different angles, is worse than him manipulating the look of his pictures. Although, Gardner changing positions and adding props, such as weapons that were not used by the specific soldiers he was photographing, is still shocking and uncomfortable, I feel that making up stories about the Civil War makes it harder for us to understand the truth of events that happened during the Civil War.

Articles: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie/the-case-of-confused-identity/>

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie/the-case-of-the-moved-body/>

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

2



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Photography (a better capture of history)

by Brennan Blankenship - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 5:19 PM

I found both cases interesting. As with anything, the use of manipulation has its purpose in creating a bias and thus challenging the viewer. Art is subjective and provides multiple views on the works created. It has been said that "a picture is worth a thousand words." This much is true and based on this visual stimulants draw more diverse views than words that have been written. Both writing and photography are used to evoke certain feelings in their audience. Thus photographs give a clearer picture of history. Although should he choose, the photographer sheds light or casts shadows on certain aspects making the discovery for historical truth more complex.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

1



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Re: Photography (a better capture of history)

by Sydney Hall - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 1:35 PM

Brennan, your post really struck with me. You said, "Art is subjective and provides multiple views on the works created," and I concur. There really is so much for a viewer to intake, from the colors to the objects being subjected in the photos, etc. Rather, what could be important to one person could also be something that wasn't critical in another persons views. It is up to the audience to form their own opinions on what is being presented, just like how writing and photography can both evoke different emotions from every individual.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Photography (a better capture of history)

by Brennan Blankenship - Friday, February 2, 2018, 11:31 AM

Exactly and after some reflection it is unbelievable how history can be manipulated or covered up. Photography in its truest form provides a snapshot of history. But when it has been manipulated how can the truth be revealed?We see modern cases of this in foreign wars.

A few years ago war images were in the face of Americans and was apart of the media. Now it is virtually nonexistent and what images we do see present themselves in pieces not giving way to the full truth. Such imagines regarding the horrors of war and yet on the opposite imagines that show soldiers compassion and willingness to help the civilians that are effected by such wars. To see the pictures of the Civil War and to think that this wasn't no modern day photo shop is crazy. How can they do such a thing to history? What were they trying to accomplish? If only for increase in sales of photos?

After viewing the picture of Grant I find myself wondering how such a picture could not be regarded as altered. It clearly looks like a "cut and paste" upon further examination. While it is true that they was no action photography back then respect should still be given to the dead that fought for their side's cause during the Civil War. Thankfully we have brave historians such as Frassanito who seek out historical truth and make the path public.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Photography (a better capture of history)

by Sydney Hall - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 10:35 AM

Especially considering that most photo altering can be done with a click of a button in photoshop. I don't think we will ever know for sure the true objectives of those who changed the scene or message with a photo in the past. We can only assume monetary value and impact. With some of these altered photos, I'm sure it was easy to convince others back in the past that they were in fact true considering most people never saw the battlefields with their own eyes.

With the case of solving a Civil War Photograph involving General Ulysses S. Grant, nothing seems out of place until you look closer at the details within the photo. Today we can see those pixelated edges of the merged images and we have numerous text

resources that we can seek out to confirm the identity of the setting, person, and objects seen in the picture. Back then, they didn't have those and even if they possibly did, it would only be a handful of resources. In the Library of Congress article they state, "The Confederate soldiers had no connection to Grant and were nowhere near City Point, but their plight became a handy background to highlight Grant's leadership nearly 40 years later." Not only did they merge a few images together, they also did it much later after the war had already ended and then passed it off as an earlier photo.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Re: Civil War Photography

by Saige Sloan - Wednesday, January 31, 2018, 9:36 PM

Of the two cases: The Case of Confused Identity and The Case of the Moved Body, I found The Case of Confused Identity to be most egregious to me. Photographer Alexander Gardner captured hundreds of grossly historical photographs and narratives, complaining them in his two-volume "*Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of War*", later published between 1865-1866. Gardner became one of the head suppliers for documenting the Civil War. His photos of conflict were frequently reproduced and resold to campaigns and various catalogs.

In Gardners Civil War collection, 1,118 images have yet to be reproduced from his online *Sketchbook* masses, but more so copying negatives produced from the *Prints and Photographs Division*. In the late 1950's, the Library of Congress established new captions for Gardner's photos, using their 'best' historical information accessible, easily disregarding Gardner's original caption published in his *Sketchbook*. Though his photos were republished and re-captioned by himself and others, I still find Gardner's work to be historically credible throughout the Civil War time period.

When it came to Gardner's original prints, I find the concept of altering the initial caption to offer more of a synthetic value, rather than authentic. The original pictures taken hold a historical purpose on behalf of Alexander Gardner's work and credibility as a photographer. Distorting the original caption of the photograph offers a miscomprehension to readers today. Due to the time length of the Civil War from today, all information perceived comes from reading various artifacts and in this case, picture captions.

The statement in which claims that Gardner aimed to "achieve a more striking effect or to cater to the interest of the public, [he] sometimes rearranged the elements in his photographs or departed from the facts in his writing..." is in which arguably valid in a sense, though the Library of Congress staff later did the same. It can be hard to believe the truth behind the caption of the picture labeled, but essentially it falls under the 'what you see is what you get' concept at this point in time. Properly labeled or not, there was still a heavy emotion behind each one of Gardner's photos taken throughout the Civil War time period. Each photo will be deemed as a precious artifact in representation of the War there once was.

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-glass-negatives/articles-and-essays/does-the-camera-ever-lie/>

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

3

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Don't Move Bodies Dude That's Rude

by Heather Saxon - Thursday, February 1, 2018, 4:17 PM

I was considerably more bothered by “moved body” because it involved moving the body of a dead man multiple times. There just has always been something wrong to me, about manipulating the dead beyond moving for necessity and burial. Manipulating them for profit or to further one's own political agenda are especially bothersome since the purposes themselves are nefarious-even if they are for the “good” side. While I also hated the manipulation done in Confused Identity, at least the men were let rest a little more than their brother.

I still believe it is possible to find the historical truth about this time period because we know not all photos were altered. More than likely a majority are untouched; and while the scenes could always be manipulated, either by a different angle or an improper/manipulated description (like saying the Union boys were Confederates in Confused Identity) or whatever other means, we will have historians to generally weed out and properly re-sort the mistakes.

People will believe what they read and believe what they see; whether or not what is manipulated is written or a picture doesn't make much of a difference. I might say, because a picture is the first thing someone might point to as “evidence” (example: the notorious “video of Bigfoot” by Patterson and Gimlin) of something they believe is true, that it is worse to manipulate photos, because they're the first to be believed since it's an image a person can look at and see, whereas text is left primarily to the mind. Text is much easier manipulated, however, so it can have a more easily widespread effect. Someone with knowledge of special effects, setup, or photo manipulation can change up a photo, but anyone who can write can change the text evidence.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Re: Don't Move Bodies Dude That's Rude

by Rose Thomas - Friday, February 2, 2018, 11:55 AM

First off, I ended up reading your post because of your title. I think that was what Escobar was talking about when he said make them interesting and informative. Good job!

I agree that moving a body for your own personal gain is rude. I know I would be offended if I found out someone did that to one of my relatives. Although I do understand why they did it.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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Re: Don't Move Bodies Dude That's Rude

by Leah Livesay - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 11:03 PM

Hi Heather, I too was much more bothered by the moved body images. I can't imagine moving a dead body to hopefully make an extra buck, but people do it, I just don't think I was expecting it from people during that time. I also think it's still possible to find the “truths” about the Civil War, I think I'll just be looking extra close at the details and information being given from now on. I've always heard people say “I'll believe it when I see

it”, referring to many different situations, however I think it’s important for people to also remember that seeing isn’t always believing! These images are good examples of just that, unfortunately we can’t always believe what we see or read, but I’d like to think that more often than not, we can believe what we see and hear. Wishful thinking!

Sum of ratings:2 (1)

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Re: The Ethics of Civil War Photography

by Dakota Brotherton - Saturday, February 3, 2018, 4:34 PM

Between the two cases and the photographs used/the means used to obtain them, I personally feel that the case of the moved body was much more egregious. To do something as heinous as to move a dead body in order to gain more of a “shock value” or to present an image in a way that coincides with an “artistic vision” is outstanding to me. While the case of the mistaken identity could be considered wrong, I would rather have him change the perspective of my dead body than the position of it. Wanting to document history is one thing, but to try and recreate it in a way that will help one gain a profit seems pretty slimy to me. While things like this can sort of be tied in with the way Ken Burns uses certain artifacts or bits of information in order to manipulate the audience’s emotions, it just comes off as a whole other level of wrong. Especially when considering the ways in which photographs were presented at the time. I doubt anybody would question the story behind the picture because of the taboo that should be associated with staging a photo-op with a dead body. For this reason, Alexander Gardner and the works he produced should be up for speculation and the accuracy of his historical accounts of death and tragedy should be considered highly questionable.

Sum of ratings:3 (1)

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Lying Camera?

by Leah Livesay - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 8:52 PM

After viewing the forum materials for Civil War photography, honestly I am pretty shocked by both "cases". It's hard to imagine images being "photoshopped" back then as they clearly did not have the technology we have today, but it seems they had their own ways of "photoshopping" images. It's unsettling to think and know that people alter the truth for their own benefit.

As for the confused identity photos, I could almost understand mistaking the soldiers in the photos if they had been taken by different photographers. However, being taken by the same person only with different captions and from different angles, it's terrible that Gardner manipulated the information knowingly. I must say I am even more shocked by the moved body photos. Moving a dead soldiers body to capture more images in a terrible time of war, that to me is extreme.

These cases make it hard to believe what you are seeing in the photos, it makes it hard to believe what is told to be the truth. For a long time I personally felt like a photo was an easy way to show the truth, but with all of the technology we have today that idea is no longer true for me and now, to see that so many years ago photographers were manipulating images as

well, well that's hard to accept. I think that it is unfortunate that finding the truth is so hard to do, especially in a time such as war so long ago. I definitely feel that knowing images have been altered from the Civil War makes it hard to determine what is and is not the truth.

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History written by the victors and the liars.

by Nicholas Bates - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 11:23 PM

I find the moved body picture to be more egregious for the reason being, that the so called history/moment never even existed in the way that it was presented. I have always been accepting that the history will be written by the victor and that the stories left over afterwards will be showing the victor in a better light. However, when the history that is written is entirely fabricated or even partially fabricated it leads to trust being lost. Look at today's main stream media that has abused fabrication so badly that most don't believe anything they hear from it.

Sum of ratings:1 (1)

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The Grant double

by Nicholas Bates - Sunday, February 4, 2018, 11:51 PM

If this isn't General Grant than there is one main reason I can't be mad about it. The reason being imagine that you are Grant and someone is asking you directly after a battle to stand still on a horse for awhile so they can get your picture. This seems foolish to me because he would have battle plans to make and men to see to and keep moral up while possibly having to check which of his top officers were even still alive. If they asked someone to step in and pose to be him for inspiration it is more understandable to me then many of the other things we have discussed about the civil war photos.

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