

Photographs are the popular historicism of our era; they confer nothing less than reality itself. (Alan Trachtenberg)

With reference to the above statement, assess the contribution of war photographers, and their visual constructions of conflict, to the historical record.

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Synopsis

In the increasingly visual modern world, society is putting great emphasis on photographs as a means of historical edification. The fallibilities inherent in photographic records are commonly disregarded, due to the assumption that photographs are integrally objective (“the camera never lies”); while, in contrast, academic historians often neglect visual evidence, believing that it is of inferior calibre to written scholarship. This research project aims to test Trachtenberg’s claim that “Photography is the popular historicism of our era; it confers nothing less than reality itself” using war photography, consisting of unusual and emotionally charged scenes as its focus, while allowing me to combine my two passions of history and photography. This essay explores the notion that visual constructions are not inferior to written history, but in the palpable record of the past scenes and emotions of warfronts they tender, make their own unique contributions to the historical record.

Three case studies substantiate this essay’s conviction that photographers do provide evidence of past realities (both physical and anthropological), despite interjections of subjectivity and deductions from or additions to this reality. First, Alexander Gardner, American Civil War photographer, presented and captioned his photographs into a narrative form. Secondly, Frank Hurley, First World War photographer, manipulated his images through montage and superimposition. Finally, Robert Capa, Spanish Civil War photographer, engaged in selective focus and staging. Each photographer has displayed a reality, yet one amended and diversified in nature.

Close analysis of the photographers’ motives and methodologies, the visual record they produced, and the wider pool of historical evidence, has led

to my understanding that these photographers have significantly contributed to the historical record. This conclusion was reached based on the unequivocal physical traces of reality provided by photographs (indexicality), and the emotional and anthropological insights that scrupulous and informed examination of photographs has allowed.

Essay

Historiographical debate regarding the contribution of photographs to the historical record centres on the methodology of photographic creation and production, as well as the imposition of the photographer’s personal vision on the seemingly objective visual construction. Photographs provide concrete images of the past, offering a historical insight of a different nature to written histories. Photographs are composed of what philosopher and logician Charles Sander Peirce called indexical signs; that is, actual traces of something that exists, or once existed (Atkin, 2010). Technically, they are created by the reflection of light off an object, person or scene, reacting with a light-sensitive surface to produce an image. This indexicality means that photography is of great evidentiary value to the historical record, providing a physical trace of something that was once existent, in a similar manner to a fossil. Susan Sontag explains that “a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist” (Bull, 2010, p.14). Hence, Trachtenberg is correct in stating that photographs confer “reality itself” (1985, p.1); however, the veracity of photographs is complicated since they convey either a partial, fragmentary reality, or material that surpasses reality. Such material is of considerable evidentiary significance, but if disregarded limits the photographers’ contribution to the historical record.

There are three ways in which the “reality” conveyed by photographers can be complicated, by reducing or adding further layers of anthropological material. The first is in the arrangement and captioning of the photograph. While the photographs themselves may present visual actuality, the historical interpretation tendered is mediated by the manner of their presentation. Although the photograph remains indexical, its display is not. Alexander Gardner, a Scottish photographer who documented the American Civil War, exemplifies the ways in which this can affect, but not diminish, a photographer’s historical value. Manipulation of the photograph, specifically montage, by the photographer is another historically interesting area, exemplified in the work of Frank Hurley, official photographer of the Great War (1914-1918). While each negative slide involved is indexical of reality, the final montaged production is an iconic sign: a subjective representation as identified by Peirce (Atkin, 2010). The contribution of these images is debated by historians as they surpass actuality, constituting an alternate type of historical source. The third way the reality conveyed by photographs is compromised is through selection, which may involve both exclusion and additions to reality. Spanish Civil War Photographer, Robert Capa, while believed to have staged his images, has nonetheless contributed to the historical record of this conflict. Hence photographs are important as “the popular historicism of our era”, for while they convey a palpable visual reality, they also carry additional interpretative and ideological data, examination of which is essential for uncovering historical truth.

While photographs were first used to document military events by the British in the Crimean War (1853-1856), the American Civil War (1861-1865) is generally regarded as the first major conflict to produce an extensive photographic record: “for the first time in history, citizens on the homefront could view the actual carnage of faraway battlefields” (Civil War Trust, 2014, para.2), providing previously unavailable insights into the war. Advancements in technology reduced exposure time, omitting the need for staging as photographers could capture movement. The indexicality of the photograph, now representative of natural action, provided clear, tangible evidence of “reality.” In the preface to volume seven of the *Photographic History of the Civil War*, Thompson claims: “the pictures here published, absolutely without change or retouching, must be accepted as truthful.” (1912, p.18). At this time, however, knowledge about the use of photography

as historical documentation was limited and later consideration has determined that while Thompson is right that the unaltered images are truthful, the means by which their photographers have presented them complicates the reality conveyed.

A case in point is Alexander Gardner, a Scottish photographer employed by Mathew Brady in compiling a complete photographic collection of the American Civil War. In reference to Brady’s collection, Oliver Wendell Holmes, himself personally affected by this war, says: “Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations” (Holmes, 1863, para.55) deeming accurate the emotional aspects of war embedded in the photographs. However, Gardner accompanies his photographs with poignant written captions, subjectively interjecting his own moral judgements of war.

Gardner’s evocatively-titled photograph “A Harvest of Death at Gettysburg, July 1863” (Appendix 1) exemplifies this. Alan Trachtenberg, Emeritus Professor in English and American studies at the Yale University, explains that “Gardner’s text takes hold of an image, saturates it with meaning, and allows the viewer to incorporate its details into a generalised narrative of war as an unnatural event, a disruption of America’s self-sufficient pastoral harmony” (1985, p.16), as seen in this juxtaposition of Harvest and Death. Such photographs – themselves truthful, but their display partisan – surpass reality, as captions manipulate viewers’ emotions and interpretations. Once their fallible nature is recognised, historians can use these photographs as evidence. As Trachtenberg argues, the photographs of the American Civil War, including those of Gardner “perpetuate a collective image of the war...what it must have looked like had we been there” (1985, p.1) As the first thorough visual documentation of a major conflict, these photographs are valuably informative to historians. Photographs are historically valuable in their ability to provide emotional insights (Papstein, 1990) and the emotional insight carried by these photographs has been deemed accurate, and corroborated by Holmes, despite the subjective artifice of their presentation and captioning. These photographers therefore acted as historians, constructing an indexical record of the past and providing anthropological and emotional material. Moreover, Gardner’s presentation and captioning constructed a narrative of events, which, while complicating his work’s evidentiary value, mimics the process of constructing written history.

C. A. Beard explains that written history, in its “final, positive, inescapable definition” is a subjective act of thought: “the selection and arrangement of facts...an act of choice, conviction and interpretation” (1934, p.219-220) Gardner’s arrangement of his images, acting in the place of historians’ written “facts”, created subjectivity no different to that inherent in written scholarship.

The aim of traditional history is to create a written record of the past. Photographers rarely claim the title ‘historian’, but have an apparent superiority in this area, as their visual records appear as tangible copies of reality. The second means by which a photographer’s replication of the past becomes problematic, is through image manipulation, specifically montage and superimposition. James Francis (Frank) Hurley, First World War photographer, has been criticised for constructing photographs for dramatic, emotional impact, rather than visual accuracy. His photographs, he believed, were atmospherically veracious, and would give viewers “a better understanding of the scene” (Bickle, 1980, p.61), although, as a whole, they were not truthful warfront images.

Hurley (1885-1962) grew up in Glebe, Sydney, developing a passion for photography in his teens; he became renowned in 1905 for his high-quality postcard images. After acquiring his reputation as a skilled photographer on the Australian Antarctic Expedition (1911-1913), he was appointed Official War Photographer of the Australian Imperial Force in July 1917, and began working on the Western Front. His photographs of front-line action, casualties, and soldiers in private, provide a large pool of images otherwise absent from history’s resources.

Some of Hurley’s most famous photographs were taken at the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), 1917, including images of trenches, destroyed landscape, and war-weary soldiers. His biographer, Leonard Bickle, explains that these images are characterized by the “burning resentment” they display towards the war, and that there is an identifiable historical purpose behind Hurley’s constructed record of The Great War (1980, p.57). Hurley’s initial photographs were driven by enthusiasm to capture the courage of Australian troops; however, witnessing the horror of war led to his disillusionment and a further aspiration to accurately display the terror of war. This aim was intensified by the contrast between the priority of preserving life at the Antarctic, where he had previously worked, and

the carnage of war (Cater & Nasht, 2004). Simply in selecting the horrible sights he photographed, Hurley was imposing himself, and his own history, onto his constructed record.

Having taken extensive single negative photographs of the front, Hurley felt that the results were “hopeless” and that “nothing could be more unlike a battle” (Hurley, 1986, p.6). This led to his conviction that transmission of the tragedy of war would require manipulation of his photographs. He employed what he considered judicious manipulation, combining several negatives to create one image. Hurley believed it unfair to provide both those on the homefront, and posterity, with the meagre reality of one frame of the warfront, and that to translate the true atmosphere of the war, he needed to alter this single-framed reality. He affirmed that such manipulation was principled, as he thereby conveyed the uncompromised atmosphere of the Western Front. Roland Barthes’ essay *The Reality Effect* refutes French historian Thiers’ belief that history should show no more than the simple truth, claiming such representation impossible due to the narrative aspects of history (1986). He also correlates this to photography; an idea appropriate to Hurley’s visual constructions, for Hurley altered the simple truth due to the need for narrative in historical construction. Hurley’s composite prints cannot deliver objective, visual authenticity, as while each indexical element is evidence of fragmentary reality, the image as a whole is iconic, representing his personal view of the war in its entirety, rather than the smaller realities he could tangibly convey.

Among the most controversial of his composite photographs is *Over the Top* (Appendix 2), taken at Zonnebeke (October 1917), which incorporates twelve negatives. Each negative is irrefutable evidence for the physical existence of the object or person shown; yet their merging does not display an actual scene; rather, it shows Hurley’s personal vision of war. O’Keefe, a specialist in Hurley’s life and work, argues that the photographs lack ‘realism’ (despite the very “real” nature of the entities within the image) and that *Over the Top* is “more reminiscent of a 1920s Hollywood movie than the real thing” (Hurley & O’Keefe, 1986, p.6). The scene, as a whole, therefore can be viewed as fiction. Yet despite the iconic aspects of the photographs, Hurley indirectly recognised something of great historical importance, as later articulated by historian Caroline Brothers: “[photographic] evidence is partial, merely a fragment of a larger and invisible whole”

(1997, p.170). Hurley believed that it was historically unfair to Australians to construct images that only recorded a fragment of reality; and he attempted to create an image possessing atmospheric truth, and displaying the experience of the Western-Front. His historical constructions remain valuable to historians due to both the indexicality of each palpable sector of the photograph, and Hurley's honourable intention of capturing, iconically, the authentic atmosphere of war.

Selectivity and staging is a third category of complication affecting the historical evidence provided by photographs, as photographers, constructing a visual record of the past, determine the content of their images. Dr Caroline Brothers, specialist in war photography and its historical importance, states, "In no area of war reportage is the evidential nature of the photograph more contentious than in the representation of casualties." (1997, p.161-162). This is because the photographers' motives and personal relationship to the war are highly relevant, another parallel between visual and written history. While photographs therefore cannot be taken as objective visual truth, when the relationship between "photographers and universal narratives" is considered, photographs maintain distinct evidentiary value (Quanchi, 2006, p.1). In the case of Robert Capa, photographer of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), this universal narrative involved the media, which controlled photographers' pay, and often called for concealment of war atrocities. This supremacy of the media in determining understanding of events, Macdonald claims, leads to much information being excluded and "lost" (2007, p.10). Consequently, the historical record can be misinformed of the all-inclusive truth.

Robert Capa (formerly Endre Friedmann), took photographs that were heavily sanitised for use by the media. Born in Hungary (1903), he left the country at eighteen and in Berlin changed his name to American-sounding Capa to obtain a highly-paid job as a photographer; he later worked photographing the Spanish Civil War. His media-published photographs often concealed the extent of the danger and tragedy experienced by the soldiers (Brothers, 1997). The record he left for posterity, comprised mainly of photographs in media publications, therefore, offers valuable evidence in each image's record of a real situation, but cannot veraciously represent the whole reality.

The authenticity of Capa's eminent 1936 photograph, *Death of a Militiaman* (Appendix 3), is highly contested.

Professor Susperregui at the Universidad del Pais Vasco, disputes the authenticity of the photo, believing that it was not taken at Cerro Muriano as claimed, but at a town thirty-five miles away, far from the battlefields. (Rohter, 2009). While the ambiguity regarding this photograph's historical veracity complicates its evidentiary use, Brothers argues that it provides a more subtle contribution to the historical record. She claims that although the photograph's authenticity is refuted, it substantiates "the desired belief of a particular historical era...[The photograph is] so weighted with cultural allusion that it cannot help but constitute an historical source replete with evidence of attitude, belief and resistance to the reality of change" (Brothers, 1997, p.184). Consequently Capa, despite misrepresentation, has created photographic constructions that have made a major anthropological contribution to the historical record. Capa was not a historian, and his documentation had no historical purpose, but has nevertheless led to understanding both of the battlefield through indexical signs, and of the photographer's culture, through inadvertent anthropological data.

The modern world is experienced predominantly through vision, and subsequently "photographs permeate the environment" (Burgin, 1982, p.142), making photography a popular means of studying the past. It is accessible and seemingly unambiguous, and the general view, as stated by Trachtenberg, is that "it confers nothing less than reality itself." In creating indexical images, photographers provide substantial evidence for specific, if fragmentary, realities of the past. Meanwhile, the subjectivity of visual constructions complicates, but does not invalidate further contributions to the historical record. Narrative processes shape all historical constructions: written, through selection of facts and editing; and visual, through selection of focus, framing, presentation and manipulation. However, as Barthes maintains, this need not diminish a record's legitimacy (1986). While the complex nature of their photographs makes their historical contribution ambiguous, examination of the motives of Alexander Gardner, Frank Hurley and Robert Capa, and candour regarding the subjective elements of their work, has led to recognition of their significant contribution to the historical record, through their visual constructions of past conflicts. Photographs, indeed, are capable of conveying "reality itself", due to their indexical nature, yet they also carry additional information about the photographer and their societal context, which may provide a further anthropological contribution to the historical record.

Such information embedded in visual constructions of history can contribute significantly to history's record of warfare, but when disregarded can lead to a false or less truthful understanding of past conflicts.

Appendices

Photos not shown for copyright reasons

Appendix 1: Gardner's "A Harvest of Death at Gettysburg, July, 1863"

Appendix 2: Hurley's "Over the Top" (October 1917)

Appendix 3: Capa's "Death of a Militiaman" (1936)

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