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Frassanito: Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day

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Hinz's work is intellectually so stimulating that it forces the attentive reader into uncomfortable questions. Does art express a society's ideological value systems only in totalitarian societies, or must it inevitably do so also in the present day nominally democratic societies of the West? Do not the art market and the mass media in these societies also act as constraints, if not censors, legitimizing certain artists and delegitimizing others? What does post-modernist, conceptual, or minimal art have to say about the nature of contemporary society? Has not the New Right shown preference for certain art, and how different is it in style and content from the invocation of family, clean thinking, and national glory espoused by the Nazis? Are there not increasing references to decadent art, to the role played by "secular humanists," unAmerican forces, Jews, and "Communists"? Have we not recently suffered from books being banned or burned and art works being removed? It is to Hinz's credit that he succeeds in making us feel uneasy. We begin to sense that the moldy terror faintly emanating from these art works of defeated megalomaniacs in "someone else's" past may just possibly be portents of our own future.

Ernst Pfannschmidt, Honoring the Memory of Dead Heros.


Reviewed by James Borchert
University of California, Santa Cruz

Let him who wishes to know what war is, look at this series of illustrations. . . . The sight of these pictures is a commentary on civilization such as the savage might well triumph to show its missionaries.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1863)

Only slightly more than 20 years after the "discovery" of photography in 1839, photographers set out to record visually what was to become the bloodiest war in the history of the United States. They did so with a strong interest in the financial "possibilities" as well as a concern for posterity. While their efforts seldom realized the profits they imagined, these pioneering photographers did provide Americans and the rest of the world with the first photographs of the human carnage that results from war. Although these were not the first visual representations of war (drawings had long depicted the glories of the battlefield and some military scenes had been photographed in the European and Asian wars immediately preceding), the photographs of the U.S. Civil War were the first of these views to be widely available.

Before Civil War scenes could be a commercial possibility, however, several preconditions had to be met. The introduction of an inexpensive (though cumbersome) negative and multiple print process (collodion wet plate) reduced the technological constraint on such a venture, while the number of photographic studios and supply companies developed the necessary distribution systems. Finally, on the eve of the great war, the introduction and immediate popularity of the cartes de visite and stereographs created a market for inexpensive photographs. Thus, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., a frequent writer on photography for the Atlantic Monthly, could prophesy in 1859 that "the next European war will send us stereographs of battles" (Holmes 1859:748).

While photographers were active throughout the war on both sides, often in the employ of a major studio like that of Mathew Brady, virtually all the views recorded posed troop scenes, gun emplacements, and occasional shell-torn buildings. Technology did not permit photographing actual battle scenes; long exposures (10–30 seconds), large cumbersome cameras, and a portable darkroom to prepare and imme-
diately develop the glass plate negatives greatly limited the photographer's available subject matter and method of operation. However, as Frassanito points out, there were further conditions necessary for a photographer to successfully record the human tragedy of war:

Initially, there had to occur an action of noteworthy size in order to attract the photographer's attention. The action had to be a victory, with the friendly side remaining in undisputed possession of the field and out of the range of hostile fire during cleanup operations. Equally important, the photographer had to be present on the site with all his equipment before the ugliest of the scars were covered. (p. 21)

It was not until the Battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg, Maryland, September 17, 1862) that a photographer first got his chance to "cover" a battle "before the dead had been buried" (p. 17). It is significant that this first opportunity also coincided with the battle in which the largest number of casualties (26,000) ever suffered by Americans (North and South) in a single day took place.

In his study of Antietam, Frassanito presents a narrative description of the battle and an analysis of 63 of the 95 photographs that comprise the Antietam series. Within this framework, his concerns are threefold: to "establish Antietam's significance as a landmark event in the history of photography"; to "document the Antietam series" according to location, subject, date, photographer, and the flow of the battle itself; and to humanize the visual record through vignettes of common soldiers who fought at Antietam (p. 18). While the book's close discussion of the ebb and flow of battle and the detailed discussion on locating sites of photographs are more likely to appeal to Civil War buffs, the work does raise a number of questions about the meaning and impact of these views that presented to Americans and the world for the first time the human carnage of war. It also provides important insights into early documentary photography: its practices, constraints, and limitations.

Alexander Gardner, who was the first Civil War photographer to have the opportunity to record the dead on the battlefield, took full advantage of it. While two-thirds of the Antietam photographs were typical battlefield landscapes and group portraits of northern troops, the other third focused on "human wreckage." Moreover, when presented with another opportunity, at Gettysburg, Gardner devoted nearly three-fourths of his work to "the bloated corpses of soldiers and horses" (p. 265). Other Civil War photographers focused on human carnage when the opportunity arose. Frassanito concludes that "had Gardner's Antietam series of 1862 proved a financial failure, it is doubtful that" others would have expended so much to gain similar views in later battles.
Unfortunately, Frassanito does not pursue Gardner in any detail; we do not learn how this interest evolved. Similarly, there is no analysis to determine Gardner’s method or form of presentation for these death studies; Gardner’s influence on other Civil War photographers is not treated, while the work of the latter photographers is not analyzed or contrasted. Finally, Frassanito does not try to determine the conventions developed by Civil War photographers.

While it is clear that Civil War photographs, including the death studies, were widely viewed throughout the North via exhibits in photographic studios, sale of cards and stereographs, and the conversion to drawings for illustrations in periodicals, Frassanito develops neither the extent to which these photographs were viewed nor the impact of the scenes on the viewer. Although portrait photographs of the dead prior to burial were common in the nineteenth century (Taft 1964:162; Lesy 1973), it is not clear how Americans responded to the studies of anonymous dead of the war nor how these views shaped and influenced their attitudes toward war and death.

Drawing on an anonymous New York Times reporter who found on viewing the Antietam death studies in Mathew Brady’s New York Studio “a terrible fascination,” Frassanito concludes that the visual documentary is incomplete. He effectively uses the vignettes of common soldiers to supplement what is clearly missing from the visual record: “the smells and agonizing screams” as well as the heartbreak of family and friends (p. 286). Thus, without the human element, he finds “the photographs become only sanitized and hence distorted portrayals of reality” (p. 254).

It is possible to conjecture widely varying responses to these views based on past experience of the viewer and the context in which they are seen. In contrast to the reporter, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., reported a very different response after reviewing the Antietam series in 1863. Holmes, who visited Antietam shortly after the battle to search for his wounded son (later to be the noted jurist), found the views brought back “all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene” (Holmes 1863:12).

Frassanito provides important insights into the selection process of the Civil War photographers. The constraints of technology not only ruled out actual battle scenes, they also encouraged photographers to select camera sites from which a number of photographs could be taken. When he does uncover two Civil War photographs of a battle scene (place, time, and photographer unknown), Frassanito effectively demonstrates the scene’s contrived nature. However, while other nineteenth-century photographers also used deceptive posing as well as a number of other fraudulent practices (Scherer 1975), Gardner’s Antietam scenes were not consciously altered.

Gardner did tend “to emphasize, whether consciously or unconsciously, scenes that would evoke memories of national pride rather than sites reminiscent of clear-cut defeats” (p. 224); he “was not above occasionally stretching the truth” in captions “to increase the historical nature of his views” (p. 71).

While Antietam succeeds well in what it sets out to do, it also sheds considerable light on other issues. If it is written largely for the Civil War buff, it remains useful for the student of photography and visual communication. Finally, it is a powerful statement about the realities and conditions of war.

Note
1 See, for example, Miller 1911. which unfortunately, like many early accounts of Civil War photography, distorts more than it reveals. Less comprehensive but more accurate is Gardner 1959. Among the studies that chronicle the sad plight of Civil War photographs is Taft 1964:238–246.

References
• Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Sr. 1869. The Stereoscope and the Stereograph. Atlantic Monthly 3:738–748.