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Cultural Adaptation of Civil War Photographs: On the Origins of Still Images in Ken Burns's *The Civil War**

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Abstract

This paper explores the productivity of the theory of adaptation in relation to photographs, and, more specifically, to photographs of the American Civil War. Taking Ken Burns's hugely popular TV-mini-series *The Civil War* (1990) as a starting point, it investigates the adaptation history of selected photographs, which Burns uses to tell his particular version of the war. Gary R. Bortolotti's and Linda Hutcheon's idea of treating cultural adaptation similarly to biological adaptation shall be relied upon in order to demonstrate which Civil War photographs are repeatedly used to retell the war, how this is being done and in what way this has shaped the collective memory of Americans concerning one of the most defining moments of American collective identity.

Keywords : American civil war; Evolution theory; Ken Burns; Photography; Visual memory.

Introduction

About thirty-nine million Americans watched Ken Burns's eleven-hour series *The Civil War* when it was first broadcast by PBS on five consecutive nights in September 1990. It was the major television event of that year. Ever since, the series has been continuously rebroadcast on American television, it has been distributed on VHS and DVD (digitally remastered in 2002) around the globe and is widely used in history classes on the American Civil War at secondary and university levels, remaining the most-watched Civil War documentary to this day (2022). As Gary R. Edgerton points out in "Ken Burns's Rebirth of a Nation", the series' immense

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popularity and appraisal (it garnered dozens of awards) helped turn *The Civil War* into a 'phenomenon of popular culture' (101). While the success of the mini-series was partly due to its overall technical and dramatic quality and its elaborate promotional campaign, it was Burns's approach to the Civil War as primarily an emotional event of the everyday nineteenth-century man and woman that made it so popular. Burns thereby aligned himself with historians who had already begun addressing the war from a bottom-up perspective or 'history from below'[1]. *The Civil War* can also be singled out for its representational method. As Anke Bösel observes, '[w]hat makes Ken Burns's series distinctly different from all pre-existing filmic treatments of the Civil War is that the large majority of its footage is based on nineteenth-century sources such as photographs, lithographs, paintings, newspaper clippings, letters, diaries and so on' (1995, 286).

While *The Civil War*, after its release, was widely praised by the popular media and scholars alike for a comprehensive and highly engaging portrayal of the war, there have also been critics who argued that 'the Civil War series constitutes a fictional narrative rather than a factual historical account' (Bösel 1995, 288; cf. also Edgerton). Their main criticism was directed at the way Burns takes nineteenth-century photographs out of their frames and particular contexts and appropriates them for his use without reflecting on this process or the origin of the pictures (Tibbetts 126; Bösel 2003, 28). Scholars such as Tibbetts, Bösel and Edgerton have extensively examined the way Burns, with the help of thousands of still images, created a coherent, consensus-oriented plot of the Civil War, in which North and South fought valiantly and thereby eventually helped to bring about a united modern democratic nation. Although they criticize Burns for suppressing the origin of his visual material, they have not yet traced Burns's pictorial sources or their original frames and contexts, nor have they examined the way the images were reused over time, that is, their 'lineage of descent'. Hence, they have overlooked the significant way in which Burns is part of a tradition of adapting Civil War photographs to narrate this highly contested episode of the American past.

In order to come to terms with the legacy of the American Civil War, historians continuously retell the era, which has thus become a central narrative within American culture. From the years immediately following the end of the war, artists and popular historians endeavoured to tell the tale of the American Civil War by relying on images *and* words. Indeed, the first history book published on the conflict that included written text and illustrations was already written in the first year of the war by Orville

Victor and entitled *The History, Civil, Political and Military, of the Southern Rebellion, from Its Incipient Stages to Its Close* (1861)[2]. At the same time, the war was documented and war images published in numbered series of album cards and stereographs such as *Brady's Photographic Views of the War*, *Brady's Album Catalogue*, and *Incidents of the War*. Shortly after the war, Alexander Gardner published what is today considered the foundational work of the photo-essay tradition, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866). In the *Sketch Book* Gardner included 100 images in two volumes, providing titles and texts for each of them. In the early twentieth century, the tradition was continued and culminated in Francis Trevelyan Miller's monumental *Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes* (1911). Historians of the twentieth century continued the tradition of Civil War histories in pictures. Especially with the Civil War sesquicentennial, there was a new wave of publications, including picture-based monographs such as the Smithsonian's *The Civil War: A Visual History* (2011) or Stille's *The Civil War Through Photography* (2012). In addition, a number of TV and mini-series were produced, such as *Civil War 360* (2013), or *Civil War Combat: America's Bloodiest Battles* (2000–2003) that, however, relied mostly on re-enactments. Some critical documentaries such as Rachel Boynton's *Civil War* (or, *Who Do We Think We Are)* (2021) explore popular Civil War historiography and memory culture, albeit, they seamlessly include some photographic footage from the war without contextualization. At the end of the day, apart from Ken Burns's TV-documentary, no historiographical work has used photographs to the extent Miller has done. Therefore, I will concentrate my discussion on Gardner's and Miller's works when tracking the lineage of Civil War photographs used in *The Civil War* as they mark the major milestones of Civil War history in pictures.

Applying Adaption Theory to Civil War Photographs

Photographic Civil War History has not gone unexamined. Scholars have explored the traditions, possibilities, limitations and trends of Civil War photography and photographic reporting. More recent studies have also critically examined visual representations of the war to re-assess the legacy of the war and its representation in works like Savage's *Civil War in Art and Memory* (2016). Books like Diffley and Fagan's *Visions of Glory* (2019) analyse individual photographs, their production context and the meaning and cultural significance thereby created. Yet other studies interrogate the lack of archival photographic footage and photographic absences of black individuals in Civil War records, as does Deborah Willis in *The Black Civil War Soldier* (2021). Similarly focussing on racialized histories,

Shawn M. Smith in *Photographic Returns* (2020) studies contemporary artist's engagement with historical photographs in moments of racial crisis. Lacking, however, is a systematic analysis of the history of the usage and appropriation of Civil War photographs to retell the war and the assumed 'birth of the nation.'

In this paper, I shall apply the so called 'tracking technique' or the 'phylogenetic model' (i.e. evolutionary analysis; Bortolotti and Hutcheon 454) to trace the origins of pictures and their framings as deployed in Ken Burns's *The Civil War* in order to start scrutinizing the genesis and transformation of photographic Civil War history. In 2007, Gary R. Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon in an article entitled "On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse" proposed a homology between biological and cultural adaptation, that is, a similarity in structure. They suggested that we consider adaptation as a 'process of replication', since, as they argue, '[s]tories, in a manner parallel to genes, replicate; the adaptations of both evolve with changing environments' (444). They shifted the focus to asking where the adaptation came from, how it came to 'survive' and to be repeated in different forms, and how it changed within a changing cultural environment. Bortolotti's and Hutcheon's approach is very intriguing for the purpose of looking at where a particular version of the Civil War took its root and how it changed over time.

Photographs in themselves aren't stories but a particular form of mimetically represented reality in a highly composed fashion—objects are arranged and photographed from a specific angle. This was especially true for photographs taken during the American Civil War, when photography had just grown out of its infancy, and, due to long exposure times, it was impossible to take snapshots of moving objects. Hence, a photograph in itself is a representation, a piece of art(istry). Only when it is (con)textualized does it turn into a narrative. Civil War photographs were often published as Carte de Visite, or album cards, on which were added captions or descriptive texts, or they were exhibited in galleries accompanied by explanatory comments.

Tracking the adaptation history of photographs in Ken Burns's mini-series helps shed light on the question of what is being selected for adaptation, the single picture or its representational context. As it turns out, it is both; in some cases pictures survive and are seemingly adapted for their aesthetic value and their original contextualisation is completely obliterated, so they don't carry their narrative context with them[3]. In other cases photographs have been especially successful in terms of cultural selection;

that is, they have repeatedly been used to represent the Civil War period not because they are the most artistic or well composed but because of their original rendering as part of a specific narrative.

On the Origin of Civil War Photographs in Ken Burns's *The Civil War*

Places of Remembrance

> We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel the passion of life to its top. In our youth our hearts were touched with fire. Oliver Wendell Holmes.

The preceding quotation contains the opening remarks of Ken Burns's TV mini-series *The Civil War*. Spoken by a sonorous male voice, these words are accompanied by an image of a cannon pointing towards a deep red sunset and by the sound of wind. This scene sets the stage for the ensuing documentation on the American Civil War. It creates an atmosphere of inclusion. The audience is drawn into the pictorial scene; we hear the wind and we watch the sunset, figuratively speaking, along with the cannon. The speech starts in medias res with an inclusive "we". So, it's not merely *their* experience but *ours*. We are invited to feel and to experience 'the passion of life to its top'. The cannon scene is followed by a cut to a photograph (establishing shot) of a house surrounded by trees (Fig. 1) and as the voice-over narrator explains, this is Wilmer McLean's house under attack. The sound of cannons and musket fire is audible. With the cut we move from a non-specific rather emotional space to a concrete space depicted in a war-time photograph. That is, we move from the metaphorical to the documentary realm. The emphasis on McLean's experience is heightened by the camera starting to zoom into the photograph after the first voice-over sentence. We are led to assume that the figure centre stage is Wilmer himself. Next the image is blended over with the photograph of another mansion (Fig. 2). We hear birdsong accompanied by the following narration:

> Now McLean moved his family away from Manassas, far south and west of Richmond—out of harms way, he prayed—to a dusty little crossroads called Appomattox Court House. And it was there in his living room three and a half years later that Lee surrendered to Grant, and Wilmer McLean could rightfully say, 'The war began in my front yard and ended in my front parlor'.

Fig. 1 : Andrew J. Russell, General Beauregard's Headquarters at First Battle of Bull Run, 1861. Library of Congress

Fig. 2 : Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *McLean's House, Appomattox Court-House, Virginia Where the Capitulation Was Signed between Generals Grant and Lee* / negative by T. H. O'Sullivan, positive by A. Gardner, 1865 April, c1866. Library of Congress.

The camera zooms in on a group of people seated on the front steps of the house via two cuts while we listen to McLean's story. Again the visual as well as the narrative focus shifts away from the building towards its inhabitants. The historical event of Lee surrendering to Grant turns into the backdrop of a very personal life story of the McLean family. McLean even gets a voice when the narrative shifts from third to first person: 'The war began in *my* front yard […]'.

The composition of the opening scene of *The Civil War* fulfils two main purposes; on the one hand it opens the 'story' of the war as experienced by the (common) people while at the same time, it invites the audience to (virtually) re-live, to witness, and to collectively remember that experience. On the other hand, with the use of war-photographs, a handheld camera and a soundtrack imitating wind, musket fire and birdsong, the documentary genre is invoked[4]. The composition of the first two scenes is characteristic of the documentary as a whole. The eleven-part series relies heavily on nineteenth-century photographic footage. The main function of the images is to visually support the narrative provided by the voice-over narrator and several interviewees[5]. They provide a high degree of authenticity and support the illusion of our witnessing events first-hand. In fact, we can never be sure what is depicted in the photographs. Neither the overall narrator nor the interviewees comment on the images. There is, for example, no evidence that the people in front of the houses in the scenes described above are at all related to the McLean family[6].

Burns is not the first to use these particular images in narrating the events of the Civil War. It is rather likely that some members of the American

TV-audience were familiar with these images from other representations of the war in school or history books. Even in the first photographic compendium of the American Civil War, *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War* (1866)[7], Timothy H. O'Sullivan's photograph of Appomattox Court House and the accompanying story of the surrender and McLean's move from the house at Bull Run are included (Fig. 1). Yet, Gardner's comments on the picture in 1865 primarily concentrate on the historical event of the surrender. Only the caption, 'Mc Lean's House. Appomattox Court House', and the final sentence mention Wilmer McLean: 'It is a singular fact that the owner of this house, Mr. McLean, was living on the first Bull Run battle-field at the time of that engagement, and afterwards removed to this place for the purpose of being secure from the visitation of an army' (105).

In another hallmark of photographic histories of the American Civil War, Francis Trevelyan Miller's *The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes* (Vol. 3, 1911), we find a very similar picture of Appomattox Court House, also by Timothy H. O'Sullivan (Fig. 3). It is preceded by the view of McLean's House at Bull Run (Fig. 1), just as in the opening scene of Ken Burns's *The Civil War*. The two photographs are arranged on two pages facing each other, and they are accompanied by a commentary entitled 'The Homes of Wilmer McLean Where the Battles Began and Ended' (3:314–15). Miller points out the coincidence of these two historic houses belonging to the same man and tells the story of McLean moving to another location for reasons of safety. However, the house near Manassas Station is primarily connected to General Beauregard, who chose it as his headquarters. In Miller's narrative, it is the general's dinner rather than the McLeans' house that was spoiled by a cannonball landing in the fireplace.

Fig. 3 : Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Appomattox Court House, Va. McLean House*, 1865 April. Library of Congress.

The original picture (Fig. 1) was taken by Andrew J. Russell and was part of a documentary survey of the U.S. military railroad construction corps activities in the Washington, D.C. area during the Civil War, collected in an album. The album served professional purposes and the picture was entitled "General Beauregard's Headquarters at First Battle of Bull Run, 1861", and there is no mention of McLean and his experience. While Gardener chose to represent Appo-

mattox Court House only and to merely mention the house at Bull Run, Miller decided to include a visual representation of both places and slightly shifted the emphasis towards McLean and the coincidence while still concentrating on the event of the surrender.

Looking at the lineage of the two pictures of the McLean residences and the stories connected to them, we notice apparent similarities and differences. First of all, all three authors decided to choose physical locations as sites of remembrance and to connect them to significant events. Gardner and Burns use these sites to frame their overall narrative, Burns at the very beginning and Gardner at the very end. However, they differ in the way they interpret these places as spaces of public and personal remembrance and experience. Gardner primarily concentrates on the event of the surrender. The picture of Appomattox Court House, which is the second but last in the *Sketch Book*, is followed by a photograph on the dedication of a monument on the Bull Run Battle field. So he as well connects Bull Run to Appomattox but stresses both as sites of *public* remembrance. Emphasizing the importance of these locations as memorial sites, Gardner's letter-press to Appomattox house informs us that the apple tree under which Lee received the letter from Grant shortly before his surrender was carried away in bits and pieces by the public, not even the roots remaining. Miller in a similar manner reports how the table at which Lee sat during the final negotiations at Appomattox Court House was bought by General Sheridan, and how 'the rest of the furniture used on that historic occasion was largely seized by others of those present' (Miller 3:315).

The pictures of the McLeans's residences are used from their first appearance as part of the story of public remembrance of the war. Beginning with Miller and culminating with Burns, they are increasingly transformed into sites of personal memory, evoking past scenes that we are invited to re-experience along with McLean. It could be argued that Miller, and finally Burns, do not simply take up the photograph of Appomattox Court House but also its original (con)text in *Gardner's Sketch Book*, that is, the surrender of the army of Virginia and the personal experience of Wilmer McLean. It could even be assumed that Miller included the photograph by Russell because Gardner mentions Bull Run[8]. It therefore becomes apparent that the photographs are not simply selected for their individual aesthetic value but are adapted into new contexts, that is, a particular textual setting that makes them part of a historical narrative.

In Memoriam of the Dead

In 1862 Mathew Brady displayed pictures of dead soldiers who were

killed at the Battle of Antietam in his New York Gallery. The gallery was a huge success, and subsequently, *Harper's Weekly* published engravings based on these photographs ("Scenes on the Battlefield of Antietam", 663–65). The wide distribution of photographs of Civil War casualties ensured their omnipresence and longevity. Usually, they came on cards with descriptions on the back or were part of thematic catalogues[9]. For the second photograph after the prologue of Episode 1, Ken Burns also decided to make use of one of the most famous and most often used Civil War photographs--that of a dead Confederate sharpshooter (Fig. 4).

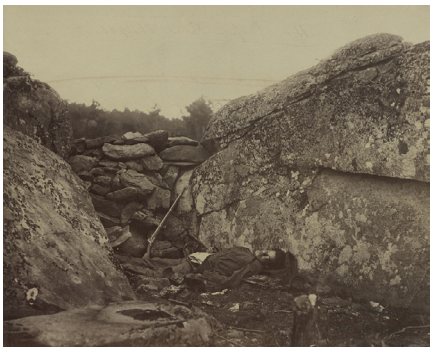

Fig. 4 : Alexander Gardner, *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, ca. 1863. Library of Congress.

The images of ruins and corpses form the visual introduction of the series. These images of dead soldiers from Antietam, Gettysburg, and Cold Harbor, all appear in Miller, and were widely distributed during the war. Here and elsewhere in the series, they function as icons of public remembrance of the dead of the war but also of the common legacy of the conflict, as the voice-over points out, '*Americans* slaughtered one another', 'in *America*', '*American* men fell'. The introductory scene ends with the picture of two soldiers and the comment:

> Men who had never strayed twenty miles from their own front doors now found themselves soldiers in great armies fighting epic battles hundreds of miles from home. They knew they were making history, and it was the greatest adventure of their lives.

The death and carnage on both sides is juxtaposed with brave men fighting in 'epic battles'. The war turns into an adventure, a kind of experiment by courageous men who made history. Again, as with geographical sites, Burns creates a connection between the symbolic dead (common fate) and individual lives and fates, all contributing to a common cause that was 'something higher', as Barbara Fields expresses it in one of the interview sequences (Episode 1).

In Episode 5, "The Universe of Battle, 1863", we meet again with the Confederate Sharpshooter (Fig. 4). The picture of the sharpshooter accompanies the voice-over narration 'places still remembered for their ferocity of

the fighting that happened there. […] Devil's Den'. The place is identified as Devil's Den but the body remains anonymous. Alexander Gardner uses the same photograph in his *Sketch Book* in a similar manner. The caption Gardner chose for this picture is "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter". The accompanying letter-press anchors the scene within the conflict at Gettysburg. Gardner describes how '[f]rom Culp's Hill, on our right, to the forest that stretched away from Round Top, on the left, the fields were thickly strewn with Confederate dead and wounded' (89). The context in Burns and Gardner is the same. Both photographs are used as examples of the carnage of battle, by Burns as part of a series of four pictures of dead soldiers and in Gardner via the verbal commentary of the fields being covered with dead bodies.

Gardner reports from a personal perspective 'on *our* right' and goes into detail concerning the position of the dead body:

> The trees in the vicinity were splintered, and their branches cut off, while the front of the wall looked as if just recovering from an attack of geological smallpox. The sharpshooter had evidently been wounded in the head by a fragment of shell which had exploded over him, and had laid down upon his blanket to await death. There was no means of judging how long he had lived after receiving the wound, but the disordered clothing shows that his sufferings must have been intense. (89)

In a similar manner to Burns's slow close-up camera pan in Episode 1, Gardner provides a detailed 'verbal' close-up of the dead body with its 'disordered clothing'. Burns connects the picture to 'places still remembered' but refrains from identifying the dead soldier to whom he had already drawn the audience's attention in the very first sequence of the documentary. By juxtaposing the remembered place to the forgotten soldier as an individual, Burns highlights the discrepancy between public remembrance of the event and the oblivion of the individual who gave his life. Gardner finishes his narrative on the "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter" by stating that when the photographer returned to the scene he still found the skeleton of the soldier untouched.

Just as Burns does, Gardner stresses that while the dead of Gettysburg are remembered as a collective entity, the individual sufferer and hero was left to oblivion. The corpse remains an iconographic object of remembrance, forgotten as an individual human being. Gardner further emphasises the fact that we are not only dealing with an icon but with an individual by

speculating on what the sharpshooter might have felt and thought in his last moments:

> Was he delirious with agony, or did death come slowly to his relief, while memories of home grew dearer as the field of carnage faded before him? What visions, of loved ones far away, may have hovered above his stony pillow! What familiar voices may he not have heard, like whispers beneath the roar of battle, as his eyes grew heavy in their long, last sleep! (89)

In this passage, Gardner invites the reader to speculate with him what the dying soldier experienced. He highlights the pain and sorrow of the individual but at the same time, by allowing for different options, he opens it up as a characteristic experience of any man dying in the field. Hence, the audience is reminded of the individual suffering of every single man who should not be forgotten when honouring deeds collectively.

In *The Civil War*, the photograph of the sharpshooter is part of a series of four pictures of dead individuals that symbolize the losses in places 'remembered for their ferocity of the fighting'. Those are followed by two images of corpses assembled for burial. They are accompanied by voice-over comments that list the high casualties of Union and Confederate regiments. We are reminded again of the tremendous, almost unimaginable numbers of the dead. But then, just as Gardner, Burns turns towards the experience of the individual. Gardner's famous photograph, "Dead in the Slaughter Pen, Gettysburg" (Fig. 5), which he published as a stereograph, appears on the screen, accompanied by the following narration: 'Dear father, finally I came to poor Albert lying on the ground wounded under the left eye. He had also had a ball shot through his left leg. I had no one to help me bear him from the field. I then called the captain of another company to assist me'.

Fig. 5 : Alexander Gardner, *Gettysburg, Pa. Dead Confederate Soldiers in the "Slaughter Pen" at the Foot of Little Round Top*, July 1863. Library of Congress.

With this personal tale, Burns shifts the focus from the general to the specific experience—that of Albert. The montage and framing of the sequence support this narrowing of the focus. First, we see two dead men in the picture. But at 'I had no one to help me', there is a cut, followed by a close-up of the corpse in the foreground. However, we don't know who Albert is; while the name invokes a specific individual, the reference remains uncer-

tain. Again, we have the general experience communicated via the specific. This technique is also emphasized by the cut to the next photograph, showing Confederate dead gathered for burial (Fig. 6).

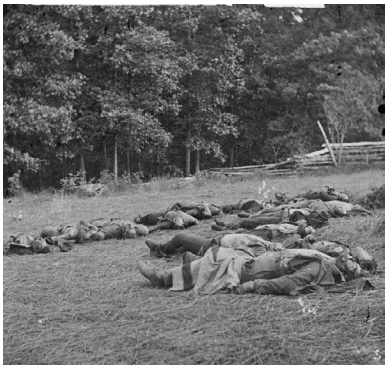

Fig. 6 : Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Gettysburg, Pa. Confederate Dead Gathered for Burial at the Southwestern Edge of the Rose Woods*, July 5, 1863. Library of Congress.

By shifting between visual images of individuals and groups, Burns reminds us that we are dealing with individual fates of countless men. Most of all, Burns as well as Gardner, shift the gaze from grand battles, victories and casualties to the mundane and the individual suffering.

Miller uses "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter" (Fig. 4) and "Dead in the Slaughter Pen" (Fig. 5) very similarly to Gardner and Burns. They appear in Volume 9, entitled *Poetry and Eloquence of Blue and Gray*, in the subchapter on Gettysburg. In general, the volume concentrates on the war experience and on remembering the war. The battle at Gettysburg is the only one that gets a separate chapter. As in Gardner and Burns, Gettysburg is singled out as especially crucial to war events and to collective memory. The two photographs under discussion are situated at the beginning of the chapter and follow each other immediately. They are placed on the right-hand page, and below each we find a short descriptive text. The commentary for "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter" is very clearly an adaptation of Gardner's text. A short contextualisation is followed by the story of how the young man died: 'Then at last a Federal shell, bursting over this lad, wounded him in the head, but was not merciful enough to kill him outright. He was evidently able to spread his blanket and must have lain there alone for hours in his death agony' (Vol. 9, 205). In contrast to Gardner, Miller speculates more on the evidence he finds in the picture (such as the blanket)[10] and presents an authoritative version of the lad's experience. Nonetheless, Miller also stresses that this individual fate was typical for many (205). A clear indication that Miller was inspired by Gardner is that at the end of the passage, he also mentions that the photographer who took this picture returned to the site while attending the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg in November 1863. He even uses Gardner's phrasing: 'The musket, rusted by many storms, still leaned against the rock; the remains of the boy soldier lay undisturbed within the moul-

dering uniform. No burial party had found him' (Miller, 2005).

Gardner, Miller, and subsequently Burns, stress the individual tragedy of the dying soldier and the sorrow of the families at home. This finds prominent expression in their usage of a by now iconic photograph of a dead sharpshooter. It is a Gardner photograph called in the *Sketch Book* "A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep" (Plate 40, 88, Fig. 7). In the *Sketch Book* it precedes "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter". Its letter-press concentrates on the deadly job of the sharpshooters while highlighting the tragedy of the individual sharpshooter depicted. Miller includes the picture in volume two in the chapter on Gettysburg, again closely aligning himself with Gardner in commenting on the sharpshooters' function to kill. All three representations of the photograph—in Gardner, Miller, and Burns— use a medium-shot in which the dead body lies at the centre and is surrounded by rocky terrain. The face and figure of the soldier are clearly visible. It is not a remote corpse but a very immediate expression of death. Miller and Gardner emphasize the tragedy of dying and inflicting death, a message that is also an inherent quality of the picture itself, since we see a musket prominently positioned right at the head of the man.

Fig. 7 : Alexander Gardner, *A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania*, July 1863, c1866. Library of Congress.

Yet while Gardner speculated only on the feelings of the dying, and Miller tried to decipher from the surrounding evidence what the experience must have been like, Burns, draws his audience inside the interior world of a dying man.

According to all three authors, we should remember the Civil War as an achievement by men from the North and from the South who helped create the modern democratic American nation. Moreover, all three of them try to communicate this message via factual evidence (photographs) combined with narrative and poetic stories. Gardner already declared in the preface to the *Sketch Book* that '[v]erbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy; but Photographic [sic] presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubt-

ing faith' (7). Nonetheless, he thought it necessary to supply his visual evidence with short narratives. Miller, in a similar vein, claims that the purpose of his book is 'to testify in photograph to the true story' of the war and that '[t]his is the American epic that is told in these time stained photographs' (Vol. 1, 16). Just as Gardner, Miller works extensively with texts—essays, personal narratives, poems, song lyrics—to tell his photographic (hi)story. Finally, Burns positions himself within this tradition of photographs plus personal stories albeit orally transmitted.

Tracking the origin and lineage of Civil War photographs and the different texts and contexts they appear with helps us understand the construction and manipulation of collective memory. In the case of the American Civil War, it seems to be pictures that are connected to individual suffering and at the same time to a reconciliatory interpretation of the conflict that were adapted again and again to tell the tale to new generations. Bortolotti[11] and Hutcheon argue along with Dawkins that cultural selection is conservative as well as dynamic. When the (cultural) environment remains stable, certain images keep flourishing (449). So we could assume that the cultural and political context in which Gardner's, Miller's, and Burns's works were published must have been relatively 'stable' in some respect since the adaptations of pictures of corpses and places, along with their narrative contexts, remained relatively homogenous over more than 150 years.

When we look at the cultural and political situations in the United States at the time of the publication of these texts, the relative stability of the representation of the Civil War is readily explained. Gardner's *Sketch Book* appeared just after the end of the war. The Union had recently been restored. The South had suffered a horrible defeat with regard to casualties, destruction of property and land, and the abolition of their economic system based on chattel slavery. Both sides but especially the North regarded reconciliation as the key for prospering together as one nation in the future. Consequently, representations of the war tried to interpret it as North and South united in a common cause, which helped restore a Union free of the evil of slavery.

When Miller's *Photographic History* was published in 1911, the Reconstruction period was over, the South had to some extent economically recovered from the war, and the nation as a whole was prospering with new mass industries and mass markets. Miller and his colleagues explicitly set out to cover the war from both sides (cf. East 197). Most Civil War photographers and publishers came from the North and presented what

was felt by many Southerners to be a rather biased account. Around 1900, with the former Southern Democratic elite largely restored to political and economical power, efforts of Southerners increased to cater for a more favourable representation of the part the South took in the conflict. Institutions such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy were formed that devoted themselves to a 'proper' representation of Southern valour and patriotism, for example, by promoting and supporting the publication of diaries of Southern women (see S. Gardner 5). In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that Miller continues and even intensifies the reconciliatory tone of Gardner and offers an interpretation of the war as a trial and triumph of North and South.

Ken Burns's mini-series occurred at the end of the 1980s. According to Bösel, Burns set out to capture his audience on an emotional level and to create a new self-image for them. All in all, he 'suggests a total reconciliation between North and South and […] advocates an unproblematic end of the war for all white Americans' (283). Such an attempt at a new self-definition via a common glorious past must be seen in the context of the end of the Cold War. Western societies celebrated democratic values and a common heritage of freedom and liberty, distancing themselves from what they perceived as tyrannical undemocratic socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and China. Burns very much adopts the Cold War rhetoric of consensus formation prevalent during the Reagan Presidency and provides the nation with a tale of a common legacy required to forge a unified nation.

Notes:

[1] Prominent examples of this tradition, that looks at the experiences of ordinary individuals in order to arrive at the "grand narrative" of history, are James M. McPherson's books on the war, and works that approach the war from the perspective of women, such as H. E. Sterkx's Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War (1970) or Drew Gilpin Faust's "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War (1990).

[2] For books published during or shortly after the war that rely on textual and visual material see: Harper's Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion in the United States (1866), Frank Leslie's Pictorial History of the American Civil War (1862), and Benson Lossing's Pictorial History of the Civil War. (1866–68).

[3] Nonetheless, as we shall see, these presentations still carry with them their original contextual realization and thereby, unwittingly, perpetuate, for example, ste-

reotypes originally connected to them.

[4] Ken Burns put a lot of effort into creating an 'original' soundtrack. He recorded the same species of birds mentioned in records of the time and recreated cannon and musket fire. See Bösel (1995, 286) and Williams (3).

[5] Altogether, there are five expert interviewees that repeatedly appear throughout the series: Shelby Foote ('writer'), Barbara Fields ('historian'), Ed Bearss ('historian'), Stephen B. Oates ('historian'), James Symington ('former Congressman').

[6] In the catalogue entry for the picture at the Library of Congress, we find the following description: "Photograph showing a group of people seated on the steps of the brick house in which the terms of surrender were signed on the ninth of April 1865 in the village of Appomattox Court House. <http:// http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007685834/>. The identity of the figures in the foreground seems to be unknown.

[7] As Elizabeth Young explains, in "Verbal Battlefields", the Sketch Book was a crucial moment in the history of the photographic medium, 'but that moment was defined by words as well as images, and his [Gardner's] words are indispensable to how his volume reconstructs the image of war as well as the warring nation' (57). Young provides further insights into the genre tradition of the sketch and delivers the first literary analysis of the letter-presses, as Gardner called the textual comments to the pictures.

[8] Alexander Gardner was one of the most popular Civil War photographers. At the beginning of the war, he worked for Mathew Brady, who was the first to organize a corps of field photographers. In late 1862, Gardner left Brady, taking many of the photographs and some photographers with him, and opened his own studio in Washington. For the Sketch Book, he used photographs by his team. Thus, he did not have access to Russell's album.

[9] Interestingly, these same pictures are today widely distributed on internet websites that discuss the Civil War in one way or another.

[10] Gardner also commented on the use of a blanket in the letter-press to "A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep" (Plate 40, 87). He interpreted the blanket as an indication of the sharpshooter having chosen this spot as a permanent position. Today, thanks to the research of scholars, such as historian William Frassanito, we know that most of the pictures of dead individuals at Gettysburg were staged by Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan. The blanket was in fact probably used to move the corpse from one place to another. See Frassanito 186–92. Neither Gardner, nor Miller or Burns comment on the staging and the common manipulation of Civil

War photographs but they use them freely as incontestable documentary footage.

[11] There exist thousands of Civil War photographs, Burns alone is said to have worked with about 16.000 (Henderson, 3) and Gardner had 3.000 to choose from (Gardner, 7).

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